Chapter 2

Jewish Epigraphy and Diaspora: 
The Case of Asia Minor

1 Introduction

The flurry of research activity in the field of Jewish epigraphy in the last 25 years went hand in hand with a burgeoning of interest in the diaspora.1 That is not a coincidence—on the contrary: Much of our knowledge of the Jewish diaspora in Graeco-Roman antiquity is derived not, or not so much, from literary sources but from epigraphic and other archaeological evidence. For instance, when we look at the city of Rome, we will find out that the literary evidence about the Jewish community there is meagre, but we do have some 600 inscriptions, and these are our most important source of information.2 Several other such examples could be mentioned, but there are also instances of the reverse situation, such as Alexandria. Most of what we know about the Jewish presence in that major city derives from literary sources, not from inscriptions (of which we have only some 20 whereas the literary evidence is plentiful).

In the present paper I will focus my attention on an important area of the Jewish diaspora, sc., Asia Minor, in order to demonstrate that it is not literary sources but epigraphic materials which are our main source of information.3 The literary sources at our disposal are rather scarce: only a handful of references in pagan literary sources, several more in Josephus and the New Testament, and some also in the church fathers and in canons of church

1 See M.H. Williams, Jews in a Graeco-Roman Environment (WUNT 312; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 1–7.
councils. Apart from the few references in Christian sources, most of the other literary evidence concerns the last three centuries BCE, and the picture that arises from it is not only rosy. We find that the Jews had to contend with repeated violations of their rights. The literary documents leave the impression that “in a number of cities in Asia Minor, Jews often met with local opposition to their rights and privileges and had to appeal to Roman authorities who always ruled in their favour.” The picture we get is that, although Jewish communities, keen to retain their own identity in the midst of a pagan society, often met with resistance, that very same society enabled them over the long run to maintain their way of life without insurmountable problems. On the whole, these communities seem to have been able to lead rather uneventful lives.

On the other hand, we have some 260 Jewish inscriptions, the overwhelming majority in Greek and only a handful in Hebrew or other languages. And there are archaeological remains as well, not very many, but some are spectacular (I will briefly come back to that later). When we now take a look at these inscriptions, the first thing to be noticed is that, where the literary sources make it clear that by the first century CE, Jewish settlement had spread all over Asia Minor, this is more than confirmed by epigraphic evidence: we have inscriptions from at least some 75 Anatolian cities, towns, and villages, most of

4 Barclay, Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora 274: ‘[T]ime and again their communal institutions were challenged and their religious customs ignored.’ At pp. 259–278 Barclay sketches the situation of the communities of Asia Minor up to the time of Augustus solely on the basis of the literary sources. The contrast with the picture that arises from the (later) inscriptions is considerable.


6 There is, for instance, the important pro-Jewish edict issued by the Emperor Augustus in 12 BCE stating that the Jews “may follow their own customs in accordance with the law of their fathers … and that their sacred monies shall be inviolable and may be sent to Jerusalem and delivered to the treasurers in Jerusalem and they need not give bond (to appear in court) on the Sabbath or on the day of preparation for it after the ninth hour; and if anyone is caught stealing their sacred books or their sacred monies from a synagogue or an ark (of the Law), he shall be regarded as sacrilegious and his property shall be confiscated to the public treasury of the Romans” (Josephus, Ant. Jud. 16.163–164).


8 The old collection of material by Frey in CJJ 11 (1952) was notoriously bad, but fortunately all relevant material has now been conveniently collected in W. Ameling, Inscriptiones Judaicae Orientis II: Kleinasien (TSAJ 99; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004). At pp. 571–574 Ameling also lists the literary sources for Judaism in Asia Minor (cf. also pp. 32–36).