Chapter 1

Contributions to the Second Temple by Diaspora Jews

As mentioned at the beginning of the introduction, it is common to find among those living in the diaspora “an idealization of the real or imagined ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation.”¹ This chapter investigates the contributions of diaspora Jews to the Jerusalem temple, including general offerings and the annual half-shekels, both of which demonstrate how most diaspora Jews supported the temple during the Second Temple period, even though they lived at a distance from it.² After examining the diffusion, nature, and significance of these offerings (§1.1), we will consider any instances of dissent about the half-shekels contributions (§1.2) as well as the origins of this annual practice (§1.3).

¹ Diffusion, Nature, and Significance of Contributions to the Jerusalem Temple from Diaspora Jews in the Second Temple Period

Both Philo and Josephus portray the annual contribution of half-shekels to the Jerusalem temple as universal among Jews, including those living outside of Palestine. In an especially glowing account of the temple, Philo praises its enduring wealth, which is secure because every male Jew twenty years of age and older annually sends “ransom money” (λύτρα), or the half-shekel contribution, to the temple (Spec. 1.76–78).³ The abundance of these offerings and the spread

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¹ Cohen, Global Diasporas, 17.
³ That Spec. 1.76–78 refers to the half-shekel contributions is clear from Philo’s allusion to Exod 30:12–16 and his association of λύτρα with this Pentateuchal text elsewhere (Her. 186). In Exodus YHWH tells Moses that all Israelite men twenty years of age and older must offer one half-shekel in order to make atonement after a census. The Greek version of Exod 30:12 translates ἀνθρώπος as λύτρα (on the connection between the first-fruits and ransom, see also Sacr. 117).
of Jews throughout the world necessitate “a treasury for the sacred money in every city” (ἀνὰ πᾶσαν πόλιν ταμεῖα τῶν ἱερῶν χρημάτων). Philo refers to the half-shekel donations as both “first-fruits” (αἱ ἀπαρχαί) and “sacred money” (τὰ ἱερὰ χρήματα). In fact, very few texts explicitly mention the half-shekel, or the δίδραχμον (e.g. Philo, *Her.* 186; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.310–313). Put differently, αἱ ἀπαρχαί and τὰ ἱερὰ χρήματα at times may refer (1) specifically to the half-shekel contributions or other offerings or (2) more inclusively to both half-shekels and other gifts. Thus, our discussion of the half-shekel contributions will be intertwined with evidence of other offerings sent by diaspora Jews to

Philo assumes that this passage in the Torah is the legal justification for the annual practice of sending half-shekels to Jerusalem in his own day. In his mind, it is an ancient Jewish custom stemming back to the original half-shekel provisions for the tabernacle in the wilderness, contributions which were meant to protect the people from the wrath of ΥΔΩΡ. In *Her.* 186, Philo says, “And was not the consecrated δίδραχμον portioned out on the same principle? We are meant to consecrate one half of it, the drachma, and pay it as ransom (λύτρα) for our own soul, which God who alone is truly free and a giver of freedom releases with a mighty hand from the cruel and bitter tyranny of passions and wrongdoings, if we supplicate him, sometime too without our supplication ...” (Unless otherwise noted translations of Philo’s works are adapted from Francis H. Colson and George H. Whitaker, *Philo*, [LCL; 12 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929–1962]). Generally, the half-shekel is equivalent to the entire δίδραχμον, but Philo’s different formulation of it here appears to be dependent on the Greek text of Exod 30:13 (see more detailed discussion of this text in §1.1.4.).

4 In a remarkably similar passage, Josephus also attributes the great wealth of the Jerusalem temple to the continual contributions of Jews throughout the world, saying, “But no one should wonder that there was such wealth in our temple because all Jews throughout the world and God-fearers, even those from Asia and Europe, were making offerings to it for a long time” (*Ant.* 14.110).
