

The Civic Status of the Alexandria Jewish Community In Ptolemaic and early Roman periods

Much has been said about the Jewish community of Alexandria, the most powerful, as well as the best recorded Diaspora community in Antiquity. Yet, the principal problem, which has provoked the publication of several hundred pages since the beginning of the last century resides in the definition of its civic status in Ptolemaic and early Roman periods. In particular, scholarship has focused on whether or not Jews in Alexandria possessed the Alexandrian citizenship, as Philo and Josephus seem to imply by assigning them the title of *Alexandreis* and *politai* in several passages. The publication in 1924 of the papyrus containing the Claudius' Letter to the Alexandrians (*P. Lond.* 1912 = *CPJ*, II, 153), in which it is explicitly declared that Jews in Alexandria were inhabitants of a "foreign city" (*ibid.* l. 95), produced a virtually definite agreement on the question of citizenship. However, the definition of their civic status remains still a notorious enigma for modern scholarship, since no substantial documentary evidence is preserved and our knowledge is mainly dependent on the apologetic and in many cases contradictory testimonies of Philo and Josephus. What is attempted here is a survey of the problem with reference to the most important relevant literature and a reconsideration of a few points, which may contribute to the hitherto efforts of scholarship for a more acute description of the Jewish civic status in Alexandria in Greco-Roman times.

The Ptolemaic Period

The beginnings of the Jewish settlements in Alexandria are dated, according to Josephus (*Bellum*, II, 487; *C. Ap.* II, 35; 42), to the times of Alexander the Great. However, for lack of other discovered evidence, it is difficult to date the establishment of an organised Jewish community there to the last quarter of the IVth century, despite Josephus' supplementary testimony that Alexander, apart from permission to reside in Alexandria, offered the Jews civic rights "equal to those of the Greeks" as a reward for their military support against the Egyptians (*Bellum*, *ibid.*); a privilege confirmed later by his successors, who even "allowed" the Jews the title of "Macedonians", (*Bellum*, II, 488; cf. *C. Ap.* II, 36; *Ant.* XII, 8). This has been generally contested –though not fully refuted– by modern scholarship, not only because it is not found in any other source, but mostly because of the contradictory reports of Josephus himself, who in his *Jewish Antiquities* attributes the definition of the Jewish rights not to Alexander the Great but to Ptolemy I Soter (XII, 8). Indeed, the earliest epigraphic evidence, consisting of a number of tombstones from the El-Ibrahimiya cemetery, 3 km north-east of Alexandria (*CIJ*, II, 1424-1431 = *JIGRE*, nos. 1-8), seems to be of the IIIrd century B.C. and thus, the establishment of the Jewish community in the city is most probably dated to that period (Smallwood, 1976, 221; Kasher, 1985, 189; Haas, 1997, 95).

a) *The political organisation of Alexandria and the Jewish question*

The basic idea of the political organisation of Ptolemaic Alexandria, like every Hellenistic city, was the model of the classical Greek “city-state”, and more particularly the Athenian pattern (Fraser, 1972, vol. I, 110-111). Its organisation as such presented, however, significant complexities, due principally to two fundamental features: i) its multi-ethnic character, which required political and legal constructions unknown to the classical “city-state” and ii) its being the capital of a kingdom, which *de facto* abolished the full autonomy and freedom, normally acquired by a *polis* (Bickermann, 1939; Fraser, 1972, vol. I, 93-131).

The available evidence implies indeed that Alexandria was organised not as an ordinary *polis*, but as a collection of *politeumata*, i.e. separate political organisations of ethnic character, independent of each other but all subordinate to the central royal government, from which their members derived their civic rights as permanent residents of a foreign city (Lüderitz, 1994). In regard to the Greek population, evidently co-existing with other politically organised ethnic groups, they were organised in a separate civic body as well, which preserved many of the major political features of the *polis*, but, being itself subject to the central government, functioned more or less like a *politeuma*.

Briefly, the Greek civic body preserved its own magistracy, possibly derived from the *gymnasium*, and from the IInd century on it had been endowed with a *gerousia*. Like in ordinary *poleis*, its members were registered in demes and tribes and they were distinguished from the rest of the city’s population by the possession of the Alexandrian citizenship, for which applicants needed both parents to be Alexandrian citizens. Normally, performance of the *ephebeia*, and thus membership of the *gymnasium*, was expected too, but this did not officially constitute a necessary qualification for the requirement of Alexandrian citizenship, neither did it secure its acquisition.

Indeed, it appears that throughout the Ptolemaic period it was not unusual for non-Greeks –including quite a number of Jews– to obtain a gymnasium education, without having necessarily been granted citizenship (Launey, 1949-1950, 865-869; Feldman, 1993, 59-61). We may easily assume that some of those did take advantage of the ambiguity in status definition that existed before the Roman administrative reorganisation of Egypt, to declare themselves Alexandrian citizens and to claim privileges enjoyed, normally, by citizens only. This could have been the case of Helenos, son of Tryphon, who is attested in a document of the early Roman period to make a petition for exemption from the payment of the poll-tax, using among other arguments that of his “appropriate education” –obtained, as it seems, in the *gymnasium* (CPJ, II, 151).

The ample references in Philo’s works to Jewish attendance in gymnasium activities and theatrical performances are not the only to support the involvement of Jews in the cultural life of the city. The translation of the Hebraic Torah into Greek

under the reign of Ptolemy II, Philadelphus (282-246) in order to meet the needs of the Jewish community (*Letter of Aristeeas to Philocrates*, 9-11 and 28-34; Philo, *De Vita Mosis*, II, 5, 29-7, 44; *Jos. Ant.* XII, 12-118.) constitutes, perhaps, the best evidence of to what degree the Alexandrian Jews were Hellenised, already by the mid IIIrd century B.C. For, in the Mediterranean Diaspora –and in cosmopolitan Alexandria in particular– Hellenistic culture was not incompatible with Judaism –at least not to the degree it might have been considered as such in Palestine. Quite the contrary, it appears that throughout the Ptolemaic period, the major problem of the Alexandrian Jewry was to conciliate the spirit of their times with their religious consciousness or –as J. Mélèze-Modrzejewski, accurately enough, put it– “d’être à la fois Juif et Grec” (Mélèze-Modrzejewski, 1997, 83; cf. Feldman, 1960).

Yet, there is no doubt that individually several Jews did possess Alexandrian citizenship (Philo, *Flacc.* 47), usually granted by the kings *ad honores*. Alexandrian citizenship, like citizenship in any Greek *polis*, was not exclusive, and, therefore, its acquisition did not obligatorily require renouncement of membership in any other independent political organisation. The case of the Jews, presented though particular complications, since citizenship entailed worship of the municipal deities and was thus incompatible with Judaism and membership in the Jewish *politeia*. This was possibly arranged by the granting to the Jews, along with citizenship, of a special privilege of exemption from the city’s cult. Unfortunately, we dispose no direct evidence of such a practice under the Ptolemies, as we do under the Romans; nevertheless, we know of Jews who possessed citizenship without being fully assimilated with the Greeks, even if in practice this was most often the case.

Of significant interest on this account is a document dated to 13 B.C. containing a deed of divorce between an Alexandrian citizen, Hermogenes, son of Hermogenes, and a non-citizen Jewess, Apollonia, daughter of Sambathion (*CPJ*, II, 144). A reasonable explanation of this union, which deprived the couple’s children of the right to inherit their father’s citizenship, would be that Hermogenes, like Apollonia, was of Jewish origin and still member of the Jewish *politeia*, and thus, endogamy was for him of greater importance than an ‘appropriate’ marriage with an *allofyle* of his equal civic status. And this reminds us again of the strange case of Helenos, son of Tryphon, mentioned above, far-fetched as it might appear the example; is it not quite often the case when we write ancient history? So Helenos, however being a son of an Alexandrian citizen (*CPJ*, II, 151, l. 3), was himself, only a member of the Jewish *politeia*, as it is indicated in the document by the erasure of the term “Alexandrian” in l. 2 and its replacement by the more acute designation “a Jew from Alexandria”. The fact that Tryphon’s son did not inherit his citizenship may simply imply that, like Hermogenes, Tryphon had a non-citizen Jewish wife, choosing to be, although an Alexandrian citizen, faithful to the Jewish law of endogamy. Isolated as both examples may be, they are nevertheless quite indicative of a kind of conciliation, in Ptolemaic Alexandria, between Jewish and Greek identity, not only from a personal but from a legal point of view too.

b) *The Jewish political organisation*

According to Josephus, the Jews, from the beginning of their settlement in Alexandria, resided as a group (community) in a separate district of the city, especially assigned to them by the kings, so that “throughout mixing less with aliens, they might be free to observe their rules more strictly” (*Bellum*, II, 488; *C. Ap.* II, 32-36; *Ant.* XIV, 117). It follows from this that the Ptolemaic government recognised the Jewish right to live according to their ancestral customs, while some kind of political organisation is also implied (Davies, 1951, 102). The latter was, according to the *Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates*, a *politeuma* (§ 310). Although this bit of information is not sufficiently confirmed, the well attested *politeumata* of other foreign ethnic units residing in Ptolemaic Alexandria provided the grounds to suggest that such was the type of the political organisation of the Jews as well (Applebaum, 1974, 473; Smallwood, 1976, 226). A plausible suggestion, confirmed, besides, by our evidence of the internal structure of the Alexandrian Jewish community, which implies, indeed, a *politeuma*-like organisation. Hence, a virtual agreement on the significance of Aristeas’ testimony for the definition of the Jewish civic status under the Ptolemies has been established.

Philo and Josephus, on their turn, describe the Jewish civic body in Alexandria as a *politeia* or *Ioudaion politeia*; a political term with many senses in Greek, which provoked an even deeper confusion to scholars. In the first place, *politeia* signifies ‘citizenship’ or a ‘body of citizens’ and reasonably enough led to the assumption that Jewish acquisition of Alexandrian citizenship was implied. But *politeia* signifies also a ‘state’, a ‘political organisation’ or a ‘constitution’, and it is surely with these senses that the term should be interpreted in our case, as supplementary evidence and modern bibliography have proved (Smallwood, 1976, 229-230; Kasher, 1985, 358-364). Accordingly, the members of *politeia* are called *politai* (or *Ioudaioi politai*), a term denoting both the citizens of a *polis* and members of a *politeia*, though the former are usually distinguished in official documents as *astoi*, that is citizens of the *asty* (Bickermann, 1929).

The Jewish *politeia* in Alexandria –like every Jewish civic body in the Diaspora– was based on the Jewish ancestral laws (*Flacc.* 53; *Legatio*, 371) and on the participation in political rights (*Flacc.* 53). From these the Jewish community derived its civic rights as an ethnic unit living in a colony (*Flacc.* 46; *C. Ap.* II, 38), judicial and financial autonomy included. The former is sufficiently illustrated by the ample references to autonomous Jewish courts in Egypt and in Alexandria, though their sphere of operation is not quite clear (Goodenough, 1968). As for the latter, its being constituting a prominent Jewish right is evident by the fact that throughout the Ptolemaic period the Jews were faithfully fulfilling their annual payment of the temple tax, a major religious duty and, therefore, a condition *sine qua non* of the Jewish right to live according to the ancestral laws (Philo, *De Spec. Leg.* I, 76-78; cf. *Jos. Bellum*, V, 417; *Ant.* XIV, 110-118).

With regard to its internal organisation, already by the times of the completion of the Septuagint, the Alexandria Jewish community formed a *politeuma*, the internal affairs of which were administered by a number of officials (*Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates*, 310), obviously independent from the city's magistracy, who formed a council of elders (*gerousia*). Unfortunately, the existence of the latter is not confirmed by other discovered evidence and this silence of sources for more than a century –if combined with Strabo's testimony to a Jewish leader, an *ethnarch* (*ap. Jos. Ant.* XIV, 117), who acted as a monarch, having the supreme political and judicial authority and governing the nation as if he was "the ruler of an independent state" (*ibid.*) may lead to the assumption that the Jewish *gerousia* –if it had, actually, ever existed in Alexandria– had been abolished some time during the Ptolemaic period and re-established in the early Roman period by Augustus (Momigliano, 1944, 114). However, this is not at all certain, for Philo's statement that Augustus assigned to the *gerousia* "the supervision of the Jewish affairs" after the *genarch's* death (*Flacc.* 74) does not by any means suggest that Augustus re-established or even established the council of elders but only that *gerousia* became in the Roman period the supreme political and juridical organ (Box, 1939, *ad. loc.*; Smallwood, 1970, 6). Thus, bearing in mind Augustus' refusal to re-establish the Greek *boulè* (Dio, LI, 17, 2), we find it more reasonable to suggest that the Jewish council of elders did exist under the Ptolemies but it was possibly deprived of all its major functions at the same time with the abolition of the Greek *boulè*, possibly under Ptolemy VII, (Evergetes II)–Physcon, as soon as he gained the throne from Cleopatra II, to whom the Jews had offered military support during the civil war of 145 B.C. (Bevan, 1968, 306-307) Later on, when the king was reconciled with the Jews, the powers of the *gerousia*, apparently, were not retained by it, but were concentrated into the hands of an *ethnarch*, whereas the former continued to exist on a non-executive basis.

But which were those powers of the *gerousia* inherited by the *ethnarch*? Strabo (*supra*) is quite explicit, although not entirely illuminating; the *ethnarch* was responsible for: i) the enactment of internal judgements; ii) the supervision of contracts; iii) the supervision of ordinances. The first and second points concern his right to exercise internal jurisdiction –unfortunately, not sufficiently enlightened, the only documentary evidence available consisting of a papyrus dated to 13 B.C., recording a registration of a loan contract at the Jewish record office of Alexandria (*CPJ*, II, 143). Meagre as it is, this evidence confirms, nevertheless, Strabo's testimony regarding the *ethnarch's* supervision of contracts, while it constitutes the only direct reference we possess to an autonomous and officially recognised Jewish institution. In regards to the third point of Strabo's testimony, namely the *ethnarch's* supervision of ordinances, it illustrates his role as the link between the community and the central government, implying, furthermore, that the Jewish *politeia* –like every political body in the city– was subject to royal edicts, which limited its autonomy to a certain degree.

The Roman Period

The Roman annexation of Egypt by Octavian in 30 B.C., after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra VII at Actium, marked undoubtedly a new period for the whole population of the country and for the Alexandrian Jews in particular. Augustus, pursuing Caesar's toleration policy, confirmed the traditional right of the Jews to live according to their ancestral laws (*Ant.* XVI, 163), safeguarding the existence of their *politeia*, while Josephus provides us with the supplementary testimony that the privileges offered to the Alexandria Jews by Alexander were not diminished under the Romans (*Bellum*, II, 488). Yet, the new political reality could not but have a certain impact on Jewish civic status, although not a direct one.

a) "*Alexandrians*" and "*Alexandrian Jews*" in Roman Alexandria

The Roman civic stratification of Egypt –although based, to a certain extent, on the existing Ptolemaic one– was developed on a fundamentally different system, according to which the place of residence and membership in local associations determined the civic status of the population. Thus, a basic distinction regarding their civic rights between urban and rural population was established and reinforced by different rates of taxation (Bowman & Rathbone, 1992; Rathbone, 1993). As regards the former, the legal distinction –already existing under the Ptolemies– between citizens and non-citizens of the *poleis* was accepted and reinforced. Citizens constituted a highly privileged class, while non-citizens with right of permanent residence –which was the case of Jews– preserved their traditional privileges, derived from their right of *origo*, but, from a strictly legal point of view, they were classified on the same level with temporary residents and rural population as *peregrini dediticii*. Close to that, a third category, the *Hellenes*, i.e. the hellenized population of Egypt, was also recognised, considered, in regard to their rights, as a middle class between citizens and *peregrini dediticii* (Kasher, 1985, 75-77).

But let us restraint ourselves to Alexandria, being now not the capital of a kingdom but an imperial city. Under the new policy, it soon became apparent that the Jewish *politeia* –actually without having been deprived of any of its rights (we must bestow some credit on Josephus for that)– was not on an equal footing any more with the *polis* in regard to its civic status. Alexandrian citizenship, to begin with, became the intermediate stage for the acquisition of Roman citizenship; Alexandrian citizens enjoyed the exclusive right, among the other populations, to participate in the Roman administration and Jews preserving their ethnic identity – i.e. the members of the Jewish *politeia*– were excluded from the Roman administrative machinery. Thus any Jew aspiring for a career in the imperial administration and army should have been willing to abandon Judaism in favour of the Roman citizenship, which necessarily required involvement in the imperial cult. Again, there was, evidently, a number of Jews, who had acquired Roman citizenship without renouncement of the ancestral laws. This was possible only through granting of a special roman *privilegium*, which, firstly, permitted them to practice an

unauthorised religion (*religio illicita*) and secondly, exempted them from every duty of Roman citizens that involved participation in the imperial cult, notably, the military service; a benefit, though at the same time a detriment as well for the Jews, since service in the roman army constituted the most usual road for promotions.

With regard to taxation, Alexandrian citizens were granted privileged rates as well as complete exemption from the poll-tax (*Bellum II*, 385), an annual tax introduced by Augustus in late 20s and applied to all *peregrini dediticii* regardless of property and education (Wallace, 1938, 116-134). Such an exemption of Alexandrian citizens from a tax which constituted “a symbol of subjection to Rome” (Bowman & Rathbone, 1992, 113) represented not merely an economic privilege but mostly a political and social one and naturally enough provoked reactions, especially from people who had received a gymnasium education and considered themselves Alexandrians, even if from a strictly legal point of view they were not. Helenos son of Tryphon, the Alexandrian Jew mentioned above, who is recorded to declare himself ‘Alexandrian’ and to complain for not having been exempted from the payment of the poll-tax, was certainly not the only one of his generation to suffer from such a confusion in regards to his legal identity under the new policy.

Close to those requesting citizens’ rights on ideological grounds, we can reasonably assume that those attempting to acquire citizenship for political reasons were not few, citizenship being now the obvious way for every man towards the fulfilment of his aspirations. Of considerable importance and very indicative of the situation is a document known as the *Boulè-papyrus* (*CPJ*, II, 150), in which the body of the Alexandrian citizens expresses to the emperor its anxiety for being corrupted by “uncultured and uneducated people” because of the enrolment with the *ephebes* of people liable to the *laographia* (poll-tax), infiltration into the *gymnasium*, constituting, apparently, the normal procedure for acquiring Alexandrian citizenship.

In the absence of internal elements permitting the exact dating of this document, it could convincingly enough been attributed either to the reign of Augustus (Tcherikover, 1957-1964, vol. II, 26) or to that of Claudius (Kasher, 1985, 311-313). The latter seems more illuminating indeed, especially if combined with the Claudius’ *Letter to the Alexandrians* ll. 53-59, to which the document corresponds perfectly, as I. D. Amusin first demonstrated (Amusin, 1951, 214-216 *non vidi*; Kasher, 1985, 311).

More particularly, it is suggested in the *Letter* that a new request from the Alexandrians regarding the establishment of their *boulè* had recently been submitted (l. 52), to which the emperor responded with reserve (ll. 66-68) though he declared his intention to look over the subject and find out whether the fulfilment of their petition should profit both the city and the roman interests (ll. 70-72). Meanwhile, and as this new request had been produced on the grounds of the *polis*’ concern over the preserving of its purity, Claudius proceeds to a radical action, namely the putting of Alexandrian citizenship under his personal supervision; a development implied in the *Letter*, ll. 53-57: “to all those who have been registered as *ephebes* up to the time of my Principate I guarantee and confirm their Alexandrian citizenship ...

with the exception of any who, though born of slave parents, have made their way into your ephebate" (ll. 53-57).

Regarding the Jews, we cannot possibly know the number of those registered as *ephebes* till 41 –and were, thus, granted citizenship– though we may presume that they were not many. Nevertheless, Claudius, intending to settle once and for all the problem of Jewish infiltration to the *gymnasium*, in the second part of his *Letter*, which deals with the Jewish question in Alexandria, proceeds to a restriction of the Jews to intrude themselves into the games “presided over by the *gymnasiarchoi* and the *kosmetai*” (ll. 92-93). A restriction aiming at countering Jewish ambitions for citizenship? Quite possible; if people enrolled in the *ephebate* acquired citizenship (ll. 52-53), it goes without saying that Jewish exclusion from gymnasium activities signified accordingly their exclusion from such a prospect (Tcherikover, 1957-1964, 53; Smallwood, 1976, 249). However, from a strictly legal point of view, the *ephebate* performance, although constituting a basic requirement for citizenship, did not necessarily secure its acquisition, the latter being –as we have seen– exclusively liable to the emperor’s decision. Let us remember, for instance, the exclusion of those born from slave parents, despite their having been *ephebes*. Jews –if there had been any– could have been similarly excluded if this was actually Claudius’ direct purpose. But the emperor aimed at resolving another problem too. This resided in the unlimited Jewish cultural assimilation with citizens, which, apart from confusion in status declaration in the first place, constituted also a constant source of hostility between the city’s Greek and Jewish population, which culminated in the great riots of 38-41.

b) Jewish internal organisation

As in the Ptolemaic period, so under the Romans, the Jewish *politeia* continued to exist and function on a self-administered basis, enjoying a considerable measure of autonomy on the administration of its internal affairs, jurisdiction and finances included. As regards the latter, the traditional Jewish right to collect the *didrachm* for the payment of the Temple tax remained prominent throughout the Julio-Claudian period, but it was, naturally, abolished after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the introduction of the *Fiscus Judaicus* (*infra*). Similarly, the Jewish judicial autonomy was respected under the Romans, while the jurisprudence of the Alexandria Jewish courts –as illustrated by Philo in his *De Specialibus Legibus*– covered a wide sphere of operations and included even the right to inflict the death penalty (Goodenough, 1968). Yet, it appears that Jews were equally allowed to settle their affairs before pagan courts as well, if they desired to, under the condition, needless to say, that this did not affect their religious obligations (cf. *CPJ*, II, 142-149).

With regard to the official representation of the community, its right to send embassies to the emperor and the prefect and to submit communal petitions is sufficiently confirmed (Smallwood, 1976, 242-250). Moreover, Philo provides considerable information as of the Jewish right to pass decisions (*Flacc.* 97-101) –not

only of honorary character, but political as well—which constitutes supplementary evidence of the politeuma-like nature of the Jewish communal organisation.

The most important innovation in the Roman period consisted of the superseding of the *ethnarch* by a council of elders, the members of which –seventy-one, if we derive from the number of golden thrones that, according to the IIIrd century Tosefta, adorned the city’s great synagogue (*T. Sukkah* 4, 6; *Y. Sukkah* 5, 1, 55a; *B. Sukkah* 51b)– came from Alexandria’s most distinguished Jewish families (Smallwood, 1976, 227-233; Stern, 1983, 168-169; Kasher, 1985, 255). Thus, *gerousia*, retaining in A.D. 12 its former role as the chief political organ of the Jewish community, functioned under the leadership of a certain number of officials (*Bellum*, VII, 412). In regard to the *ethnarch* or *genarch*, it is explicitly stressed by Josephus that the post continued to exist as well (*Ant.* XIX, 283), possibly having been included in this new political scheme as one of the council of elders’ leaders or even its president as G. H. Box (1939, 103) quite convincingly suggested.

As of the functions of the *gerousia* and the limits of its authority, unfortunately no discovered evidence illuminates us on which those were. Neither could we possibly tell with confidence if the council of elders actually replaced the *ethnarch* in his duties, as those are described by Strabo (*supra*), for Philo’s vague statement in *In Flaccum* 74 (*supra*) fails to provide more than mere information that under Augustus the *gerousia* assumed “the supervision of the Jewish affairs”. What we positively know, nevertheless, is the *gerousia*’s authority to convey assemblies and to effect arrests (*Bellum*, VII, 409-417), which, evidently, preserved even after A.D. 70.

c) *The crisis and the remedy: the years A.D. 38-41*

The political and social advancement of Alexandrian citizenship practically abolished the *isopoliteia*, which, according to Josephus, had defined the relationship between the Jewish and the Greek political organisations since the times of Alexander the Great. Thus, the political struggle of the Alexandrian Jewish community for retaining their former status of equality to the Greeks began and disturbed the city throughout the first half of the 1st century. The Jewish political demands naturally reinforced the hostility against them and the anti-Jewish feeling – till then confined and expressed mainly in what we call “anti-Jewish literature” – finally broke out openly, leading to the great conflict of A.D. 38-41.

To discuss the pogroms of A.D. 38 and their aftermath the way it is described by Philo in *In Flaccum* and in *De Legatione ad Gaium* (§§ 120-136) is out of the purposes of this paper and of little value, since much has been written and a virtual agreement among the scholars has been reached (Gambetti, 2009).

Briefly, an edict issued by the Roman prefect Aulus Avilius Flaccus invalidated the traditional rights of the Jews (*Flacc.* 54), which practically meant the abolition of the Jewish *politeia* and, consequently, of all the civic rights derived from it. They were not driven out though –perhaps owing to their great numbers, for their expulsion from the city would have been under the circumstances a legal

action– but their residence area was considerably reduced (ibid., 55-56; *Legatio*, 124-128) and for the first time in their history the Alexandrian Jews were confined into a ghetto (*Legatio*, 128). What followed was the arrest and scourging of the Jewish leaders (*Flacc.* 80) –a punishment hitherto applied to Egyptians only (ibid., 78-79; Goudriann, 1992, 88), which emphasised the degradation of the Jewish status– the attacks against Jewish houses (*Flacc.*, 86-89) and the dragging of women to the agora and to the theater (ibid., 95-96). Close to that, synagogues were burned and despoiled (*Legatio*, 132-134, 137), in spite of the explicit protection of the Jewish religion by Augustus.

The religious rights of the Jews and their *politeia* were eventually restored by Claudius (A.D. 41-54), soon after his accession, with an edict, unfortunately preserved only in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*, XIX, 280-285, and by his *Letter to the Alexandrians* (CPJ, II, 153, ll. 73-104), sent a few months later.

The authenticity of the edict as preserved by Josephus has been the subject of a long debate among the scholars, not only because of the notorious apologetic attitude of our writer, particularly when citing official documents– but also because of a number of words and phrases contained in the text which were considered inappropriate in an imperial edict. Notably, the notorious opening with the designation of the Jews as “Alexandrians”, a term never attested referring to the Jews in imperial documents and bearing under the Romans a certain legal significance, reinforced the suspicions of its being a forgery. However, several phrases in the *Letter to the Alexandrians* implying that the emperor had already dealt with the problems between the Alexandrian Jews and the Greeks in a previous document (ll. 77-78, 82, 87-88) supported the existence of the edict quoted in *Antiquities* and a general agreement has been produced on its importance for the examination of the status of Alexandrian Jewry in this period (Pucci Ben Zeev, 1998, 295-326), despite its obscurity in certain points, especially if compared to the *Letter to the Alexandrians*.

Inaugurating with the reference to the Jews as “Alexandrians”, (§ 281), the edict continues with a brief summary of the political history of the Alexandria Jewish community (§§ 281-284): “The Jews ... were fellow colonizers from the very earliest times jointly with the Alexandrians and received equal civic right from the kings”. Under the Romans those rights “were preserved ... and have never been disputed”, for Augustus desired “that the several subject nations should abide by their own customs and not been compelled to violate the religion of their fathers”. Those traditional rights of the Jews, which had been abolished during the riots of A.D. 38-41, were now explicitly restored by Claudius (§ 285): “I desire that none of their rights should be lost to the Jews ... but that their former privileges also be preserved to them, while they abide by their own customs”. The edict ends with an order to both sides to prevent in the future the arising of any disturbance in the city.

A similar confirmation of the traditional Jewish rights is contained in the *Letter to the Alexandrians* as well, though in a different tone. In the first place, the term *Alexandreis* is only applied to designate the Greeks (l. 82), whereas the Jews are

emphatically distinguished as *Ioudaioi* (ll. 83, 88). The emperor reconfirms Augustus' recognition of the religious rights of the Jews and his own earlier intervention, alluding, obviously, to the edict (ll. 85-88). Moreover he conjures the Alexandrians "to behave gently and kindly towards the Jews who have inhabited the same city for many years" and not to dishonour any of their customs (ll. 82-84). Yet, there is no reference here to equality of civic rights to the Greeks. On the contrary, Jews are explicitly reminded that they live "in a city which is not their own" (l. 95). They were, therefore, ordered "not to aim at more than they have previously had and not in future to send two embassies as if they lived in two cities" (ll. 89-92). Furthermore, they are ordered "not to intrude themselves into the games presided over by the *gymnasiarchoi* and the *kosmetai*" (ll. 92-93). Finally, it is prohibited to the Jews to bring or to invite other compatriots of theirs coming from Syria or Egypt (ll. 96-97). And like the Claudius' edict, the *Letter* ends with an affirmation of his care for the city as long as both sides "live in gentleness and kindness with one another" (ll. 101-103).

Hence, Claudius, pursuing Augustus' policy as regards the Jewish question, officially restores the traditional right of the Jews to live according to their religious customs, which was brutally abolished under the reign of Caligula (edict, §284), and acknowledges the Jewish longstanding presence in Alexandria. Regarding the similar closing of the two documents, with the emperor's conjuncture to both sides "to behave kindly" etc., interesting is the fact that neither in the edict nor in the *Letter* is made any reference regarding the cause of disturbances in the city. On the contrary the emperor explicitly declares in his *Letter* that he did not wish to make "an exact inquiry" (l. 77). As if those were of no real significance, or their investigation, under the circumstances, served no purpose; for, indeed, it appears that what really concerned the emperor was neither the rights of the Jews nor those of the Greeks, but the restoration of order in the city according to the policy of *Pax Romana*, which the Jewish political demands and the Greek anti-Judaism had put in danger.

d) *The Jewish community after the destruction of the second Temple*

In the years that followed, however, disturbances did continue in the city. The Jewish war against the Romans in Judaea in 66-70 (*Bellum*, II, 284-455) was immediately supported by riots in Alexandria, which were quelled and caused the death of 50,000 Jews, if we are to believe Josephus (*Ibid.*, 497). A rather exaggerated figure, very indicative, nevertheless, of the size of disaster. The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, which deprived the Jews of their political and religious centre, had a big impact on the Egyptian Jewry and on the Jewish community of Alexandria in particular, who saw any hope of eventual retaining of its former situation collapsing.

The status of Jewish communities in Alexandria and in Egypt was further degraded after the introduction by Vespasian (69-79) of the *Fiscus Judaicus* in A.D. 70

(Heemstra, 2010). This special tax of two drachms was paid to the temple of *Jupiter Capitolinus* (*Bellum*, VII, 218; Dio, LXVI, 7, 2) and replaced the *didracm* hitherto paid to the Temple in Jerusalem. The *Fiscus Judaicus*, unlike the Temple tax, fell on all Jews including slaves and children from the age of 3 years old (Tcherikover, 1957-1964, 80-82; vol. II, 111-116), though, according to Dio Cassius (LXVI, 7, 2), only on practicing Jews, who previously paid the Temple tax (Smallwood, 1956, 3; cf. Goodman, 1989). Hence, what hitherto constituted the Jewish contribution to the Temple according to their ancestral laws became now a regular and legally formulated tribute paid for a gentile cult.

Thus, Vespasian managed to kill two birds with the same stone: in the first place, the introduction of the tax constituted an action of exemplary punishment of the Jews, everywhere in the Empire, secondly, it contributed to the re-building of the temple of *Jupiter Capitolinus*, having, thus, confirmed Dio's testimony of Vespasian as the emperor who "collected large sums (of money) ... overlooking no source, however trivial or reprehensible it might be" (LXV, 8, 3). As for the Alexandrian Jews, who half a century earlier were complaining for not having been exempt from the payment of the poll-tax –as the Alexandrian citizens had– were now degraded even below the level of native Egyptians (Tcherikover, 1963, 28).

The almost half century that separates the destruction of the second Temple from the Jewish revolt of 115-117 (Dio, LXVIII, 32, 1-3; Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* IV, 2) and, mostly, after the slaughter of the Alexandrian Jews by their pagan compatriots in the conflict of 116 (Pucci, 1981), we know very little about the Jewish community, which is a further indication of the insignificance into which it had paled.

Nevertheless, the Jewish *politeia*, headed by its *gerousia*, evidently continued to exist and function on a semi-autonomous basis. In the first place, we learn from Josephus that Titus, when visiting Alexandria after the fall of Jerusalem, refused the local petition to dissolve the Jewish political organisation –as he had done, besides, for the Jews of Antioch (*Bellum*, VII, 108-111; *Ant.* XII, 121). Furthermore, when a number of *sicarii* fled to Alexandria in 73, aiming at involving the local Jews in a new uprising, the leaders of the council of elders convened a general assembly of the Jews to expose their plans and arresting them, handed them over to the Romans (*Bellum*, VII, 409-417). Of significant importance is another bit of evidence we possess, consisting of two documents of the early IInd century, included in a sequel of texts known as the *Acts of the Alexandrian Martyrs* or *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs* (henceforth APM), which record Jewish deputations to emperors: the first one upon Trajan (APM, no. 8 = CPJ, II, 157) and the second upon Hadrian (APM, no. 9 = CPJ, II, 158).

Isolated as they may be, these items of information constitute undoubtedly a sufficient proof of the political and juridical rights that the Jewish *politeia* preserved after A.D. 70, namely: i. the right to convey assemblies, ii. the authority to effect arrests and iii. the right to send delegations to the emperor. Yet, their being deprived of their *metropolis* had an irremediable impact on the ethnic consciousness of the Jews –even of those who had never had strong links with Jerusalem. The temptation of assimilation was now stronger than ever and we may presume that

many Jews succumbed to it. On the other, those that remained loyal servants of Yahweh were many, but their originality was forever lost.

Conclusions

On the light of the available evidence, although scattered and inadequate, we may attempt some conclusions on this account.

The Jewish community of Alexandria formed an officially recognised and politically and legally independent civic body (*politeia*), from which its members derived their individual and communal rights; these included: i. the right to build and dwell in a distinct quarter of the city; ii. the right to erect synagogues and to practice their ancestral laws; iii. the right to administer their internal affairs through a semi-autonomous Jewish magistracy; iv. the right to maintain Jewish courts and conduct legal action; v. the right to administer their finances and collect money for the payment of the Temple tax.

The Jewish *politeia* co-existed in Ptolemaic Alexandria with other independent political organisations (*politeumata*), including the body of the Alexandrian citizens (*polis*) and like every one of them was subject to the central Ptolemaic government. The members of the Jewish *politeia* –called *politai* or *Ioudaioi politai* or *Alexandreis* by the Jewish writers– were officially designated as *Ioudaioi (oi apo Alexandreias)* and were thus distinguished from the Alexandrian citizens, designated as *astoi* or *politai*

Under the Romans, while preserving their traditional rights as an ethnic unit living in a colony, they were legally classified as aliens with the right of domicile. The status of equality with the political body of the Greeks (*polis*) –in the sense that both functioned independently of each other and were only subject to the central government– which, according to Philo and Josephus, had defined the co-existence of the two organisations under the Ptolemies, was abolished under the Romans; *de facto* in the early Principate, through the Roman promotion of the country's Hellenistic element and the advancement of the political and social significance of Alexandrian citizenship, and *de jure* after the destruction of the second Temple, as a result of an anti-Jewish Roman policy inaugurated by Vespasian and pursued by his successors.

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