

# *Alexander the Great in the Jewish Sources*

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## **Introduction**

Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.), had become a legend in his own lifetime thanks to his remarkable achievements accomplished within just over a decade: sweeping victories over the Greeks, the Phoenicians, the Egyptians, the Persians and their allies, ruling nations with absolute authority without overruling them and overriding their views and aspirations and establishing a global "realpolitik" which inspired many of his successors, though often stood in contrast with his naive idea to unite the ancient world, under his rule.

The Jewish community in Palestine at the time of Alexander consisted mainly of Jewish emigrants from Babylon, who returned to the country in a few waves of immigration between 538 and 428 B.C. after several decades in exile. This political move became possible soon after the collapse of the Babylonian and Assyrian empires and the attempt made by their successors, the

Persians, to establish a new policy of "a chain of allied settlements", instead of the Babylonian practice of "expel and rule" of subject peoples. The Jewish newcomers had tried to revive their nationalistic entity in Palestine with the blessing and aid of the Persian monarchs Xerxes and Darius. However, in spite of the great enthusiasm of the immigrants and the relatively stable economic conditions the friction between them and the friction between them and the Samaritans had caused the Jews a great deal of anxiety, especially that the Samaritans were determined to establish their own temple of worship, thus creating a strong competition with the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. It should be borne in mind that this competition had begun during the absence of the Jewish elite, when the Samaritans, who were not expelled to Babylon, supplied the religious needs and social framework for the Jewish minority who were not expelled by the Babylonians and the Assyrians, and who were mainly the poor and needy.

Being not only a silkful strategist but also a brilliant politician, Alexander realized that in order to defeat the Persians he should first neutralize their allies,

thus ensuring the isolation of his main enemy. He also knew that some of the subjects of the Persians were enjoying certain privileges granted to them by their masters. Hence, if he wished to gain their support he should at least match these privileges and offer the peoples more attractive rights, in order to "keep them happy", while he was leading his army against Persia, and later, India.

The jews who were grateful to the Persians for allowing them to return to Palestine were but one example of the nations who were loyal to Persis and whose loyalty was challenged by Alexander. Alexander's conquest of Palestine in 332 B.C. was relatively easy, since, apart from the sieges of Tyre and Gaza, his troops had faced little resistance by the local inhabitants.

### **The Jewish sources**

Jewish sources which refer to Alexander may be divided into two main categories :

The historical works of Josephus and the Talmud and Midrash.

Josephus works "the Antiquities of the Jews" and, to a lesser extent, his over works "the Jewish War" and "Against Apion" provide us with valuable information on the history and politics of the time, albeit not always reliable; while the Midrashim record a number of tales about Alexander, which are in fact popular legends containing some true historical facts.

Thus we are told by Josephus in his book "the Jewish war" (11;18;7) that Alexander had granted the Jews of Alexandria the right to settle in the city, which he himself had founded, and other rights equal to those of the Greek citizens. This was in recognition of their support to him during his war against the Egyptian rulers. Josephus also tells us in his book "the Antiquities of the Jews" (11,329ff) that the Samaritan leader, Sanballat, sought Alexander's permission to build a Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim and to have his son-in-law ordained as high priest. Alexander acceded to this request and also ordered the Jewish community in Jerusalem to accept his authority. However, when the Jews refused to obey him because they had sworn the oath of allegiance to the Persian monarch, Alexander

Jews who attacked the Samaritans, tortured their leaders and destroyed their temple, and also declared the day as an official festival.

Jewish sources also emphasize the role played by Alexander as an arbitrator between the Jews and other nations. Thus, we find in Sanhedrin (p.91a) and in Midrash Rabbah (Genesis, Chayye Sarah, 61,7) that the Africans alleged ownership of Palestine, the Egyptians demanded from the Jews to pay them back for the gold and silver taken by the Israelites at the time of the exodus, and the Ishmaelites claimed partnership over Palestine, all bringing evidence for their claims from the Jewish Book of Law proper. However, their allegations were all challenged by the Jews. The purpose of the story is undoubtedly to indicate Alexander's support for the Jewish right over Palestine.

Another story in Midrash Rabbah (op. cit.) tells us that Alexander was warned by the Samaritans that the Jews would never allow him into their Holy of the Holies. So when he visited the temple in Jerusalem, he tried to enter the place but was politely refused permission by a hunchman Jew, who told the ruler that

led a punitive expedition, heading towards Jerusalem leaders decided to beseech Alexander's forgiveness. They met him outside the city of Jerusalem, and when Alexander saw the delegation he dismounted from his horse and prostrated himself before the high priest, telling his surprised entourage that he had dreamed that the Jewish high priest had disclosed to him that he would beat the Persians. Alexander then entered the Jewish temple, offered a sacrifice and granted the Jews many privileges. The Samaritans, who heard the story, invited Alexander to their temple on Mount Gerizim, but Alexander turned down their invitation.

The Talmud (Yoma, 69a) brings the same story with only minor changes. Thus, it tells us that meeting between Alexander and the Jewish leaders took place in a different location, that is in Antipatris rather than Zofim; that Alexander's explanation of his gesture was that "the image of the high priest makes me win my battles" and that when the high priest told him that the Samaritans wanted the Jewish temple to be destroyed, Alexander gave the Jews a free hand to punish them. An action which was carried out enthusiastically by the

even Jews were not allowed to enter it. Alexander threatened him by saying that when they came out he would "straighten his hump", to which the man replied: "If you could do that you would be famed as a great surgeon and receive fat fees". Although this story does not tell us whether Alexander did in fact enter the Holy of Holies, it certainly suggests that Alexander was put off with this witty jest. (Cf. the English version of Midrash Rabbah, p. 547, fn.6).

Midrash Rabbah also tells us that Alexander blessed the God of the Jews and exalted righteous men (Leviticus, Shemini, XII, 5). Also the Jews of Alexandria, who were settled in the city by Alexander, were convinced that Alexander worshipped their God. They also welcomed his decision to move the bones of the prophet Jeremaih to Alexandria (Cf. Finkelstein, Vol. I, p. 91).

Relating to Alexander supernatural powers, Midrash Rabbah (Numbers, Naso, XIII, 14) tells us that when Alexander wished to ascend into the air, he used to rise higher and higher until he saw the world look like a ball and the sea like a dish. This story is probably

complementary to the legend recounted by other sources telling about Alexander's practice to fly over a golden eagle who was trained to ascend after it was given a piece of meat and descend whenever was given another piece of it. However, when one day the second piece of meat fell, while Alexander was in the air, he did not hesitate to cut a slice of flesh from his own body and offer it to the eagle.

Midrash Rabbah (Genesis, Noach, xxxlll and Leviticus, Emor, xxvll, 1) recounts two incidents which occurred during Alexander's visit to the country called kazia. In the first case Alexander was offered, upon tray. Alexander reacted angrily by saying that he did not need their gold. Then the king of kazia retorted: Had you then nothing to eat in your own country that you have come here?

in the second incident Alexander was present when two men appeared the king of kazia (according to the second source this incident took place in a province in Africa visited by Alexander). The first man told the king that he had bought a dunghill from the other person and found a treasure in it. The buyer argued that he bought

only the dunghill, while the vendor claimed that he sold the dunghill together with its contents. The king's judgement was that the first man's son should marry the second person's daughter and the treasure should go to the newly-wed couple. Alexander was astonished by the verdict, and when the king of kazia asked him what would have then been the verdict in Alexander's country, Alexander said : I would have slain both men and kept the treasure for myself. The king of kazia then commented sarcastically that if the rain descended and the sun shone in Alexander's country it was for the sake of the cattle they had, not for the people.

Midrash Rabbah (Leviticus, Emor, xxvii, 1) also relates a witty incident that gappened when Alexander, proceeding in his conquests, arrives called Carehage which was inhabited entirely by women. The women who came out to welcome him said: "if you fight us and kill us, your name will go down in history as a king who killed women, and if we fight you and kill you, your name will go down in history as king who was killed by women". Alexander decided not to fight them, and when he left their city he wrote on its gate: "I Alexander

of Macedon, was a fool until came to the province of Carthage and learned sound counsel from women”.

The Talmud (Tamid, 31-32) tells as about ten questions put by Alexander before the Jewish sages and their answers, which clearly impressed him. It also alludes to Alexander's greed, when he was at the gates of the Garden of Eden, where he was shown a skull which the eye in it weighed more than all his treasures, but when it was covered with sand it became light in weight.

Although the myths about Alexander began in his own lifetime they continued after his death for many generations. Moreover, as the stories have been retold in different languages various versions have reached us, which usually contain additional details, but which are not more then the fruit of the imagination. Thus we find overlapping versions in medieval literature both in Hebrew and other languages, such as Arabic, Persian and Latin, and later in other European languages. Also the genres used include novels, short stories, poems and plays, in which Alexander's image was often comparable to that of a deity.

them to join his army, granted them the right of settlement in Alexandria and favoured them "at the expense of" his relationship with the Samaritans. Yet, several other rulers did similar things for the Jews without enjoying such a prestigious position in the community's heart and mind.

Moreover, since we have sufficient evidence which proves that a great deal of the information provided by the Jewish sources has deliberately been fabricated, or at least, exaggerated, [for example, many historians doubt whether Alexander did in fact visit Jerusalem or met with the Jewish leaders (Cf. M. Grant, p. 263), though some new evidence attest this event (Cf. A. Kasher pp. 19,22)], one should look for an explanation for the reason for the high esteem in which Alexander was held by the Jews of Palestine and the Jewish community of Alexandria, by heeding two major historical facts:

a. the dispute with the Samaritans, who regarded themselves as Hebrews but not Jews (Cf. the Antiquities of the Jews, 11,8,6), over religious matters, and in particular their claim for the high priesthood strongly

## Conclusions

As we have seen, Alexander's merits come out very well in the historical events and writings which concern the Jews of his time. Moreover, his amiable approach and consideration demonstrated towards them have aroused strong feelings of respect and admiration among the Jews for his personality. For even if some of the deeds ascribed to him do not always fall into line with historical facts, the myth surrounding his personality proves beyond doubt the place he had held in the hearts of the people. This may also be demonstrated by the fact that after Alexander's arrival in Palestine and his meetings with the Jewish leaders, all boys who were born that year were named after him.

Historians have often asked themselves how a nation such as the Jews who have always despised and hated their oppressors, and sometimes even rebelled against them, with the exception of a very few rulers who were respected by the Jews, could admire the conqueror Alexander so much. True, he had granted them special privileges, allowed them to continue to practise their religion without any disturbance, invited

defied by the "orthodox" Jews, caused the latter great concern. Hence, the Jews saw as their utmost priority putting an end to the attempts of the Samaritans to obtain permission to build a temple which would run into competition with the temple in Jerusalem, bearing in mind that the Samaritans's influence and their success in luring Jews to join them had jeopardized the orthodox's religious authority. Hence, developing and maintaining excellent ties with the new ruler were in the interest of the Jewish community.

b. Unlike the Samaritans who had betrayed their masters, the Persians, by joining forces with Alexander, though later they rebelled against the Macedonian governor of the area and were consequently punished severely by Alexander (Cf. Hammond, p. 130), the Jews loyalty to the Persian monarch, and their refusal to accept at first Alexander's authority, had certainly impressed the latter. He therefore decided to gain their support and loyalty in an honourable way rather than by force, though at first it seemed that he demanded their help and loyalty by threatening all the Jewish community (Cf. Hammond, p. 118).

To this one should add Alexander's interest in the heritage and cultures of the nations he conquered, which made him an enlightened ruler, who only resorted to power in case of opposition to his rule.

Concerning the question as to whether Alexander did visit Jerusalem or not, this will remain a historical enigma until more substantial evidence comes to light what no one doubts, however, is that Alexander and the Jews on very good terms. The Jewish sources at least confirm this fact.

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