Books, Letter-Writing, and the Written Word in Early Judaism

Association of Jewish Libraries
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I. Second Temple Libraries

1. Persian Archives
Ezra 6:1:

Thereupon, at the order of King Darius, they searched the archives where the treasures were stored in Babylon.

2. Greek Libraries
The Letter of Aristeas 9–11:

Demetrius of Phalerum, the president of the king’s library (του βασιλεύ τῆς βιβλιοθήκης), received vast sums of money, for the purpose of collecting together, as far as he possibly could, all the books in the world. By means of purchase and transcription, he carried out, to the best of his ability, the purpose of the king. On one occasion when I was present he was asked, How many thousand books are there in the library? and he replied, ‘More than two hundred thousand, O king, and I shall make endeavour in the immediate future to gather together the remainder also, so that the total of five hundred thousand may be reached. I am told that the laws of the Jews are worth transcribing and deserve a place in your library.’ ‘What is to prevent you from doing this?’ replied the king. ‘Everything that is necessary has been placed at your disposal.’ ‘They need to be translated,’ answered Demetrius, ‘for in the country of the Jews they use a peculiar alphabet (just as the Egyptians, too, have a special form of letters) and speak a peculiar dialect. They are supposed to use the Syriac tongue, but this is not the case; their language is quite different.’ And the king when he understood all the facts of the case ordered a letter to be written to the Jewish High Priest that his purpose (which has already been described) might be accomplished.

3. Roman Libraries
Philo, Embassy to Gaius 151:

For there is no sacred precinct of such magnitude as that which is called the Grove of Augustus, and the temple erected in honour of the disembarkation of Caesar, which is raised to a great height, of great size, and of the most conspicuous beauty, opposite the best harbor; being such an one as is not to be seen in any other city, and full of offerings, in pictures, and statues; and decorated all around with silver and gold; being a very extensive space, ornamented in the most magnificent and sumptuous manner with porticoes, and libraries (βιβλιοθήκαι), and men’s chambers, and groves, and propylaea, and wide, open terraces, and court-yards in the open air, and with everything that could contribute to use or beauty; being a hope and beacon of safety to all who set sail, or who came into harbor.

4. Jewish Libraries
a. 2 Maccabees 1:10b–2:18, c. 103 or 102 BCE

The people in Jerusalem and in Judaea and the Council of Elders and Judas to Aristobulus, tutor of King Ptolemy and member of the stock of the anointed priests, and to the Jews in Egypt, greeting and wishes
for health. Having been saved by God from great perils, we thank Him greatly as befits men who war against a king, for God Himself cast way those who made war on the Holy City.

Indeed, when the commander and the apparently irresistible army accompanying him came to Persis, they were massacred in the temple of Nanaia through the trickery of Nanaia’s priests. Antiochus came with his Friends to the shrine intending to marry the goddess and thereby acquire the money in her rich treasury as dowry. The priests of Nanaia’s temple set the money before him, and Antiochus came with a few of his men into the precinct of the shrine. As soon as Antiochus had entered, the priests locked the temple. Opening the secret trap door in the coffered ceiling, they rained stones down upon the thunderstruck commander. After dismembering and beheading the corpses they threw them out to the men outside. In every way blessed is our God, Who delivered over the evildoers! Inasmuch as we are about to celebrate, on the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the Purification of the Temple, we thought we ought to let you know, so that you, too, might celebrate it as when Nehemiah, the builder of the temple and the altar, brought sacrifices.

When our forefathers were being carried off to Persia, the pious priests of that time secretly took some fire from the altar and hid it in a pit which was like a dry well and shut it up securely so that the place remained unknown to all. Many years went by, and then, in God’s own time, Nehemiah received his commission from the king of Persia and sent the descendants of the priests who had hidden the fire to recover it. When they reported that ... they had found no fire but a viscous liquid, Nehemiah ordered them to draw it up and bring it to him. After the sacrificial offerings had been placed upon the altar, Nehemiah ordered the priests to sprinkle the liquid over the firewood and over the offerings laid upon it. When that had been done, after a while in the sun, which had been covered by clouds, began to shine, and a great shire blazed up, to the astonishment of all.

As the sacrifice was being consumed, the priests and the whole assemblage uttered a prayer, in which Jonathan led and the rest, following Nehemiah, responded. The prayer was as follows: “LORD, LORD, God, creator of all, awesome and powerful and just and merciful, our sole good king, our sole provider, the sole just One Who is almighty and eternal, the preserver of Israel from every exile, the One Who chose and sanctified the patriarchs! Accept our sacrifice for the sake of all Your people Israel, and guard Your portion and make it holy. Gather together our dispersion. Free those who are enslaved among the nations. Look upon those who have been despised and abominated, and let the nations know that You are our God. Put to torment the oppressors and the arrogant perpetrators of outrage. Plant Your people in Your holy Place, as Moses said.” The priests went on singing hymns to the accompaniment of lyres. When the sacrificial offerings had been consumed, Nehemiah ordered that they pour the remaining liquid too, . . . large boulders. As soon as the command was carried out, a flame blazed up, and when the fire on the altar lit up in turn, . . . was consumed. The news of the phenomenon spread. The king of the Persians received the report that the liquid had been found in the place where the priests being led into exile had hidden the fire and that by means of it Nehemiah and his followers had burned the sacrificial offerings. After verifying the phenomenon, the king had the place fenced in and declared it holy. The king took large sums of money and distributed them to Nehemiah and his followers. Nehemiah and his followers called the liquid “nephthar,” which means “purification,” but it is commonly called “nephthai.”

In our documents we find that it was Jeremiah the prophet who commanded those who were being led into exile to take some of the fire, as we have just told you. They also show that the prophet gave the Torah to those who were being led into exile and admonished them not to forget the LORD’s
commandments and not to let their minds be led astray when they saw gold and silver images and the ornaments upon them. With other words to the same effect, he exhorted them not to let the Torah depart from their hearts. The text also said that the prophet, on receiving a divine revelation, ordered that the tabernacle and the ark should go with him. It went on to say that Jeremiah went out of the mountain which Moses ascended to see the heritage promised by God. There, Jeremiah found a cave chamber and brought into it the tabernacle and the ark and the incense altar and blocked up the entrance. Some of those who had come along when back to mark the path, but they could not find it. When Jeremiah found out, he rebuked them, saying, “the place will remain unknown until God gathers His people together in the Age of Mercy. At that time the LORD will bring these things to light again, and the glory of the LORD and the cloud will be seen, as they were over Moses and as Solomon, too, requested, in order that the Place should be greatly sanctified.” We are also told that Solomon in his wisdom offered a sacrifice in honor of the dedication and completion of the temple. Just as Moses prayed to the LORD and fire came down from heaven and devoured the sacrifices, so Solomon prayed, and fire came down and consumed the burnt offering. . . (And Moses said, “On account of . . . the sin offering. . . was consumed.”). . . So, too, Solomon celebrated the eight days.

The same account is given also in the records and the memoirs of the time of Nehemiah, and also that Nehemiah founded a library (biblioqh/khn) and collected the books about the kings and those of prophets and the books of David and the letters of Persian kings on dedicatory gifts to the temple. In the same manner, Judas reassembled for us the books scattered in the course of the recent war, and we have them. If you have need of them, send messengers to fetch them. As we said, we write you inasmuch as we are about to celebrate the Purification. Please celebrate the days. God, Who saved His entire people and restored the heritage to us all...also...the kingdom and the priesthood and the sanctification, as He promised in the Torah. For we hope in God, that He will speedily have mercy upon us and gather us together form the lands under the heavens to His holy Place, for He has indeed delivered us from great evils and has purified His Place.

Greeks and Romans built beautiful libraries and some of them may even have contained Jewish books

b. Qumran
II. Between Divine Word and Human Interpretation

1. Jeremiah 36

In the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ‘Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today. It may be that when the house of Judah hears of all the disasters that I intend to do to them, all of them may turn from their evil ways, so that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.’ Then Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at Jeremiah’s dictation all the words of the LORD that he had spoken to him. And Jeremiah ordered Baruch, saying, ‘I am prevented from entering the house of the LORD; so you go yourself, and on a fast day in the hearing of the people in the LORD’s house you shall read the words of the LORD from the scroll that you have written at my dictation. You shall read them also in the hearing of all the people of Judah who come up from their towns. It may be that their plea will come before the LORD, and that all of them will turn from their evil ways, for great is the anger and wrath that the LORD has pronounced against this people.’ And Baruch son of Neriah did all that the prophet Jeremiah ordered him about reading from the scroll the words of the LORD in the LORD’s house.

9 In the fifth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, in the ninth month, all the people in Jerusalem and all the people who came from the towns of Judah to Jerusalem proclaimed a fast before the LORD. Then, in the hearing of all the people, Baruch read the words of Jeremiah from the scroll, in the house of the LORD, in the chamber of Gemariah son of Shaphan the secretary, which was in the upper court, at the entry of the New Gate of the LORD’s house. When Micaiah son of Gemariah son of Shaphan heard all the words of the LORD from the scroll, he went down to the king’s house, into the secretary’s chamber; and all the officials were sitting there: Elishama the secretary, Delaiah son of Shemaiah, Elnathan son of Achbor, Gemariah son of Shaphan, Zedekiah son of Hananiah, and all the officials. And Micaiah told them all the words that he had heard, when Baruch read the scroll in the hearing of the people. Then all the officials sent Jehudi son of Nethaniah son of Shelemiah son of Cushi to say to Baruch, ‘Bring the scroll that you read in the hearing of the people, and come.’ So Baruch son of Neriah took the scroll in his hand and came to them. And they said to him, ‘Sit down and read it to us.’ So Baruch read it to them. When they heard all the words, they turned to one another in alarm, and said to Baruch, ‘We certainly must report all these words to the king.’ Then they questioned Baruch, ‘Tell us now, how did you write all these words? Was it at his dictation?’ Baruch answered them, ‘He dictated all these words to me, and I wrote them with ink on the scroll.’ Then the officials said to Baruch, ‘Go and hide, you and Jeremiah, and let no one know where you are.’

Now, after the king had burned the scroll with the words that Baruch wrote at Jeremiah’s dictation, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ‘Take another scroll and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll, which King Jehoiakim of Judah has burned... Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to the secretary Baruch son of Neriah, who wrote on it at Jeremiah’s dictation all the words of the scroll that King Jehoiakim of Judah had burned in the fire; and many similar words were added to them.

2. Nehemiah 8:1–18:

1 All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra
brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. 3He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law...

7 Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. 8So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. 9And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the L ORD your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. 10Then he said to them, ‘Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our L ORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the L ORD is your strength.’ 11So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, ‘Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.’ 12And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

13 On the second day the heads of ancestral houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to the scribe Ezra in order to study the words of the law. 14And they found it written in the law, which the L ORD had commanded by Moses, that the people of Israel should live in booths during the festival of the seventh month, 15and that they should publish and proclaim in all their towns and in Jerusalem as follows, ‘Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written.’ 16So the people went out and brought them, and made booths for themselves, each on the roofs of their houses, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. 17And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them; for from the days of Jeshua son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. 18And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the festival for seven days; and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance.

3. Jubilees 1:1–11:

In the first year of the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt, in the third month on the sixteenth day of that month, the L ORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Come up to me on the mountain, and I shall give you to stone tablets of the Law and the commandment, which I have written, so that you may teach them.” And Moses went up to the mountain of the L ORD. And the glory of the L ORD dwelt upon Mount Sinai, and a cloud overshadowed it for six days. And he called to Moses on the seventh day from the midst of the cloud...

And the L ORD revealed to him both what (was) in the beginning and what will occur (in the future), the account of the division of all of the days of the Law and the testimony. And he said, “Set your mind on every thing which I shall tell you on this mountain, and write it in a book so that their descendants might see that I have not abandoned them on account of all of the evil which they have done to instigate transgression of the covenant which I am establishing between me and you today on Mount Sinai for their descendants. And thus it will be, when all of these things happen to them, that they will know that I
have been more righteous than they in all their judgments and deeds. And they will know that I have truly been with them.

“And you, write for yourself all of these words which I shall cause you to know today, for I know their rebelliousness and their stubbornness before I caused them to enter the land which I swore to their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, “I will give to your seed a land flowing with milk and honey.’ And they will eat and be satisfied, and they will turn to strange gods, to those who cannot save them from any of their affliction. And this testimony will be heard as testimony against them, for they will forget all of my commandments.”

4. Colophon of Greek Esther:

In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, Dositheus, who said that he was a priest and a Levite, and his son Ptolemy brought to Egypt the foregoing Letter about Purim, which they said was authentic and had been translated by Lysimachus son of Ptolemy, one of the residents of Jerusalem.

5. Ben Sira, Prologue to the Greek Translation:

Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them, and for these we should praise Israel for instruction and wisdom. Now, those who read the scriptures must not only themselves understand them, but must also as lovers of learning be able through the spoken and written word to help the outsiders. So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom, so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law.

You are invited therefore to read it with goodwill and attention, and to be indulgent in cases where, despite our diligent labour in translating, we may seem to have rendered some phrases imperfectly. For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language. Not only this book, but even the Law itself, the Prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not a little when read in the original.

When I came to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Euergetes and stayed for some time, I found opportunity for no little instruction. It seemed highly necessary that I should myself devote some diligence and labour to the translation of this book. During that time I have applied my skill day and night to complete and publish the book for those living abroad who wished to gain learning and are disposed to live according to the law.