

## **Israel in Egypt/Egypt in Israel:**

An investigation of the land of Egypt as concept and reality for Jews in Antiquity and the early medieval period.

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For Jews in ancient and medieval Palestine and the Diaspora, the land of Egypt was a real place and also an abstract notion shaped by scriptural texts. The nation-defining episode of the Exodus of the Israelites, the unequivocal injunction in the Torah not to return to Egypt (Deut 17:16) and the negative attitude of biblical writers in general towards Egypt, existed in tension with the fact of Jewish residence there. Jewish settlements in Egypt ranged from the time of Jeremiah, to the Jewish military garrison in Elephantine during the Persian period, to major settlements and above all the huge urban community in Alexandria under the Ptolemies and Romans. Though all these disappear in the second century following the revolt of 115–17 CE and the extermination of the Jews of Egypt under Trajan, the presence of Jews is attested again in the fifth century by patristic writers, and then through Byzantine and Islamic rule into the medieval period, principally by the documents preserved in the Cairo Geniza.

The 'Israel in Egypt' project addresses a number of questions about identity and belonging among Egyptian Jews over the course of one and a half millennia.

- 1) Did Jewish communities in the Persian and Graeco-Roman periods regard themselves as exiles from their homeland, or as legitimate and even divinely approved outposts of Judaism?
- 2) How did Jews in Egypt interpret their relationship to the land of Egypt and its inhabitants?
- 3) How did the Roman conquest of Egypt change Jewish/non-Jewish relations in Egypt?
- 4) What difference did the existence or cessation of the Jerusalem Temple make to Egyptian Jewish identity over the period?
- 5) How did Jews negotiate rule by monotheistic Christians and then Muslims, in comparison with their strategies under pagan Roman domination? Was there total cultural amnesia with regard to previous Jewish settlement in Egypt? Were Jewish anxieties regarding living in Egypt the same as for previous generations, or different ones?
- 6) What significance do the changing patterns of language use by Egyptian Jews have for ethnic and religious identity?
- 7) Over the period studied, how did Jews in Palestine and the rest of the Diaspora regard Egypt and the presence of their co-religionists there?

Key sources for Jewish life in Egypt include the Aramaic Elephantine documents and a large corpus of Greek papyri written about or by Jews, the Zenon papyri, Jewish inscriptions from Leontopolis, Demerdash and other sites, the wide range of Hellenistic Jewish literature including the bulk of the LXX, the works of Philo of Alexandria, and the writings of Flavius Josephus. For the early Islamic period there are many papyri bearing indirect testimony to Jewish life in Egypt, and for the medieval period there is the vast collection of documents produced by Jews and preserved for centuries in the Cairo Geniza.

Weekly seminars will be convened through the duration of two Oxford terms, 17<sup>th</sup> January–12<sup>th</sup> March, and 24<sup>th</sup> April–18<sup>th</sup> June 2016. These will offer a forum for the Fellows of the project to address central research topics related to the overall theme of the seminar. The findings of the Research Project will be presented at a concluding conference which will be open to the academic community. Fellows will be invited to present a paper at this conference.

Visiting Fellows will receive a stipend of £2,500 per calendar month (*pro rata*) for the period of tenure and travelling expenses up to £500. The Centre offers advice to Visiting Fellows on the location of suitable accommodation in Oxford, for which it is prudent to expect to use up to £1,750 of the monthly stipend. Visiting Fellows are provided with shared office space in the Clarendon Institute Building in the centre of Oxford, where the Leopold Muller Library is housed and where most of the Centre's academic staff have their offices.

Applications by senior scholars, and by scholars at postdoctoral and advanced doctoral level, are all welcome. Preference will be given to proposals which involve use of any special resources available in Oxford.

Closing date for applications: 9<sup>th</sup> January 2015.

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