

Video Clip: Yemenites in Biblical Text

The antiquity of the Jewish Diaspora in Yemen needs no proof. Rather, the question that arises, is around the date of the establishment of the first Jewish colony there. The legend among Yemenite Jews is that they left the Land of Israel to Yemen toward the end of the First Temple period, when they heard Jeremiah's prophecies of imminent destruction. A different tradition places their departure from the Land of Israel before that, at the time of King Solomon, either for trade or as artisans and wisemen with the Queen of Sheba. If so, those who had already established a community there were able to take in those who escaped the destruction.

Suggested Implementations

TaNakh

1. Kings I and Solomon's interactions with the Queen of Sheba
2. When introducing the book of Ezra and the return to Zion

Jewish History

1. Jewish exiles in Biblical periods
2. Ancient Jewish communities

Background

It is a widespread legend that the Jews of Yemen are descendants of those artisans and scholars who accompanied the Queen of Sheba from the Land of Israel. The basis of considering Yemen the land of Sheba is taken from the book of Ezekiel, Chapter 27, Verse 22:

רְכִלֵי שֶׁבַא וְרַעְמָה, הֵמָּה רְכִלֵיךְ; בְּרֹאשׁ כָּל-בְּשָׂם וּבְכָל-אֶבֶן יְקָרָה, וְזָהָב, כֶּתָנוּ, עֲזֻבוּנֶיךָ.

The merchants of Sheba and Ra'ama, they were thy merchants: they dealt in thy wares with chief of all spices, and with all precious stones and gold.

In Kings I 10:1, it states:

וּמִלְכַת-שֶׁבַא, שָׁמְעַת אֶת-שִׁמְעֵי שְׁלֹמֹה--לְשִׁים יְהוָה; וַתָּבֵא לְבַסְתּוֹ, בְּחִידוֹת. וַתָּבֵא יְרוּשָׁלַיִם, בְּחִיל כְּבֹד מְאֹד, גְּמָלִים נוֹשְׂאִים בְּשָׂמִים וְזָהָב רַב-מְאֹד, וְאֶבֶן יְקָרָה; וַתָּבֵא, אֶל-שְׁלֹמֹה, וַתִּדְבַר אֵלָיו...

And when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon because of the name of the Lord, she came to prove him with hard questions. And she came to Jerusalem with a very great train, with camels that bore spices and gold very much, and precious stones; and when she was come to Solomon, she spoke with him...

On her voyage to Jerusalem, the Queen of Sheba brought a great number of spices and gold and precious stones, known treasures of Yemen. The commentary of *Da'at Hamikra* notes that Sheba refers to the southwest portion of the Arabian Peninsula, the hilly, fertile land known for international trade – in other words, Yemen. After the destruction of the First Temple, a small group of Jews continued

southward to join the already established community in Yemen. This was a much smaller group than went to Babylonia, or even those that went to Egypt.

Although geographically removed from the centers of Middle Eastern and North African Jewish life, Yemen was on the international trade routes and therefore never completely isolated. Even with this exile, ties existed between Yemenite Jewry and the Jews of the Land of Israel during the period of the *Tannaim*. As Jews migrated throughout the years, the redacted version of the Mishnah arrived in Yemen fairly quickly, possibly from Jews who went to bury their dead in the Land of Israel. This is evidenced by the fact that Jews from Himyar (Yemen) were being buried at old Beit She'arim.

Handwritten manuscripts abound from the last 300 years in Yemen. There are even some manuscripts that date back as far as seven hundred years and show that already at that time the Jews of Yemen were copying older Talmudic texts, texts that arrived as the Talmud was being redacted. Talmudic fragments brought from Yemen are different in several details, both from the Eastern rendition and from the Western rendition. It stands to reason that they did not receive their standard version from either the East or the West, but rather through a source from which others had also received it. During the Talmudic period, there was a vibrant and active connection between the Jews of Yemen and the center of Babylonian Jewry as well as between Yemenite Jews and the Land of Israel.

During the Geonic period, ample evidence suggests that Yemenite Jewry maintained close ties with important Jewish centers in the world at that time. Many documents from the Cairo Geniza have alluded to their connections, as have Yemenite manuscripts that reference Geonim as well as Rabbis specifically from Rome.

As we continue through history, the connection between Maimonides and the Yemenite Jews is, of course, well known. His letter to the Yemenite Jews in their time of distress, *Iggeret Teiman*, is still widely distributed to this day. The relationship with Rambam and his writings is furthered when considering the subgroup of Yemenite Jews, called *dardaim* (דור דעה), that adhere strictly to Rambam's teachings. In fact, there are copies of printed manuscripts from 100-200 years ago from across Europe that have handwritten corrections on the Maimonidean texts as the Yemenites were known to have the most authentic copy. To this day the purest translations of Rambam are printed by the Yemenite community in Israel, including one by Rabbi Yosef Kappah.

The Yemenite Jewish community is one of the oldest known that has maintained traditions as well as contacts with the greater Jewish world from Biblical times through today.

Questions for Discussion

1. Examine a map of Yemen – how might geography have influenced the Yemenite Jewish community's culture and adherence to ancient traditions? Look at trade routes, the harshness of the mountain and desert terrains in the region, the proximity to the Indian Ocean and Africa and think about the Yemenite Jewish community within that and connections to other parts of the world.
2. Watch the video by Professor Ephraim Isaac on the history and origin of Yemenite Jewry <https://youtu.be/Khptm54i9Og> in which he talks about the ancient connection between Yemen and the people of Israel. He mentions that Ethiopian Jews preserved the First Temple culture, the Yemenite Jews the Second Temple, Tannaitic and Talmudic cultures, the Sephardic Jews the

medieval Jewish culture, and the Ashkenazim the post-industrial modern culture. What is the significance today of Jewish communities that did not evolve in their religious practice to incorporate the culture around them?

- a. What is the significance of not incorporating non-Jewish culture?
- b. What is the significance of not incorporating other Jewish practices?
- c. In your community, are there significant inroads and overlapping between the general culture? Other Jewish communities?

Suggested Readings

Simon, Laskier, Reguer, ed.s *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

Eraqi-Klorman, Bat-Zion, *The Jews of Yemen: A Portrait of a Messianic Community*. New York: EJ Brill, 1993

Kappah, Yosef, *Halichot Temian*. Jerusalem. Sixth Edition, 2007.

Kappah, Yosef, *Mishnah Tora of Rambam*, 24 volumes. Jerusalem, 1985-1997.