

## HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE JEWS IN CLASSICAL GREEK AND ROMAN SOURCES

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### **Abstract:**

Despite the many studies that dealt with the emergence of the Jewish religion, mystery still surrounds many aspects of this origin and many stages of its development, to the extent that it is difficult to give a definitive opinion regarding the origins or sources of the Jewish religion and the truth of many of the stories it contains, not to mention its ideas, jurisprudence, and teachings, which fall within the scope of Jewish theology. There was no doubt that the reason for this ambiguity is not limited to the confusion of information provided by the original sources of this religion, such as the Torah and the Talmud, in its Babylonian and Palestinian parts, and even in the Greek and Roman references that dealt with the path of this religion, its origins and its branches, because of its association with authorities, some of which are hostile and others friendly to the Jews, may give our study a certain feasibility, or it may take it away, if we follow the scientific method accurately, from the circle of repeated studies, the aim of which is often purely educational or experimental, as was the case with most studies presented by students or novice academics.

**Keywords:** Historical origins, Jews, Greek, Roman, sources.

### **Introduction:**

Historical sources indicate that the origin and history of the Jews descend from the lineage of the people of the Kingdom of Judah, which was founded by Judah, one of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel, the brothers of the Prophet Joseph and the sons of the Prophet Jacob, whose name is also Israel, and to him and his twelve sons the name of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel goes back, and they are a religious nationality. It witnessed multiple developments throughout history, and everyone who descended from the Kingdom of Judah was called a Jew. As for the Greek and Roman sources, they differed among themselves regarding the historical origins of the Jews, as Josephus Flavius attributed the Jews to the sons of Noah (peace be upon him) based on the Old Testament (The Torah) is an attempt by him to root their race and make it synchronized and interconnected with the ancient peoples such as the Assyrians and Elamites, and they have very ancient origins, relying on his references to the flood (The Flood), when he said: "Noah lived for 350 years after the flood and died when he was 950 years old, and Noah had three sons." They are (Shem, Ham, and Japheth) and that the Jews are descendants of Shem, the son of Noah (peace be upon him) (1). Josephus focused most of his attention on the framework of including the Jews within the Semitic origin as an attempt to pave the way for talking about the

origin of the Jews starting from Shem all the way to Abraham (peace be upon him) “The Person From whom the Hebrews arose and to whom they owe their distinction,” describing him, “was a man of ready intelligence in all matters, by which he persuaded his hearers, and was unerring in his reasoning. From here he began to have higher concepts of virtue than the rest of humanity, and was determined to reform and change the current ideas globally regarding God, and thus he was the first to boldly declare that God, the Creator of the universe is one, and that is, if there is another being (2).

### **Historical origins of the Jews:**

It is noteworthy that Josephus indicated that God, Blessed and Most High, promised Abraham that he would obtain the offspring in the land of Canaan. “And the Lord appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land(3).’” Instead, he said: “Abram adopted Lot, and left the Chaldeans, who was seventy-five years old.” By order of God, in order to go to Canaan, where he settled and left the country to his descendants”(4).

It is also consistent with what was mentioned by Nicholas of Damascus (64 BC to the beginning of the first century), who describes Abraham (peace be upon him) as coming with an army from a country beyond Babylon called the land of the Chaldeans to Damascus, where he mentions, “And Nicholas of Damascus says In the fourth book of his history: “King Abram ruled in Damascus. He was a foreigner who came with an army from a land above Babylon, called the land of the Chaldeans. After that, he headed to a land called Canaan, which is now called the land of Judea, where his descendants multiplied. After that, drought struck the land.” Canaan, so Abraham headed to Egypt after he learned of its prosperous land, and there he transferred to them the sciences of arithmetic and astronomy, which they had not yet learned about. Thus, these sciences came from the Chaldeans to Egypt, and after that they moved to the Greeks. Then Abraham returned to the land of Canaan and divided the land. Between him and Lot "(5,6).

This text portrayed Abraham (peace be upon him) as an invader from Babylon who took control of that city by force of arms, using a source that claimed that the Jews were of Damascene origin. Josephus tried to blend his story about the coming of Abraham (peace be upon him) and his people to Canaan with a military formula by forming a force that came under his banner, through which he was able Reaching Canaan, and perhaps it is a false claim that is not based on the truth in any way, and the Torah itself, which was adopted by the Jewish historian, clearly and frankly confirmed that Abraham Al-Khalil (peace be upon him) immigrated from Iraq alone with his family members, and the Jews did not have a presence in Iraq at that time.

Philo of Alexandria (30 BC - 50 AD) describes Abraham (peace be upon him) “that their ancient ancestor, the original founder of their race, was Chaldean; and that this people migrated from Egypt, having left their headquarters in Syria in the past.” " (7).

Biblical figures are important to Philo in how he discusses and explains his theological perspective. Philo reads Abraham (peace be upon him) in two ways: literally and metaphorically. Abraham

(peace be upon him) is literally taken from the text of Genesis and represents a historical figure who lived, married, traveled to and from specific geographical locations, and came to know God. He begot offspring, died, and was buried. As for the metaphorical Abraham (peace be upon him) (the Prophet), according to Philo's description, as a metaphor for the soul, he abandoned polytheism, saw God, learned wisdom, and advanced in virtue, both of which are integral parts of Philo's understanding of Abraham (peace be upon him) (8).

Abraham does not receive any mention from Diodorus Siculus (80-21 BC) and the geographer Strabo (64 or 63 BC - 21 AD). The reason for this omission is that both historians believed that the main founding target of Judaism was Moses.

Many people in general and historians in particular assume that the answer to the question of the origin of the Jews? It can be found in the Old Testament (the Torah), more precisely, in the five books of Moses (peace be upon him).

The Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus (55-120 AD) mentions at least five different theories about the origin of the Jews, and this explains their importance to him, which traces the Jews back to different origins. "It is said that the Jews were originally exiles from the island of Crete who They settled in the remotest parts of Libya.... Many others believe that they were of Egyptian origin, expelled from Egypt during the plague, and others state that they were Assyrian refugees.... Others say that the Jews are of illustrious origin, being the Solymi. ...Others believe that they left their homeland, Ethiopia, during the reign of the legendary Cepheus, and that fear and hatred forced them to emigrate....." (9).

This theory was unique to Tacitus, and we did not find any other historian who attributed the origin of the Jews to Crete. It is possible that the connection of the Jews to Crete explains a historical fact, as Herodotus noted, that the island of Crete was originally inhabited by non-Greeks, as he mentioned, "When the Cretans returned from Troy, They and their cattle and herds were afflicted with famine and epidemics, until the island of Crete became desolate" (10), Tacitus' theory may be based on the Phoenician connection with Crete, as shown in the myth that Europa, the Phoenician princess (11), was transported to Crete by Zeus (12).

The second theory of Tacitus regarding the origin of the Jews is that they were expelled from Egypt during the plague, as is the opinion of Mantheo (13), and other Greek-Egyptian writers, to portray the Jews as being expelled rather than voluntarily migrating, and that once a disease spread that led to terrific disfigurement of the body in Egypt ; That King Bocoris (15), seeking a cure, consulted the oracle (14), and ordered the purification of his kingdom, and the transfer of this race to a foreign land because it was hated by the gods (16).

Tacitus was by no means the last author to disparage the Jews by attributing to them a dubious origin different from that which the Jews claimed for themselves, such that the Jews are spoken of here as a superfluous population, a human conglomeration to whom Egypt gives a strong motive for founding a private "colony." them, but more importantly is Tacitus's declaration that they left

during the reign of the goddess Isis (17) herself, which attributed them to the great antiquity of the Israelites.

A third theory cited by Tacitus states that the Jews were Assyrian refugees, a landless people, who initially conquered Egypt and later established their cities in the Hebrew lands and nearby parts of Syria. This theory is closest to the truth as Abraham originally came from Mesopotamia. As stated in the Book of Genesis, “Then the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, from your kindred, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you, and I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you and exhort you. “Make your name great, and you will be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and through you all families of the earth will be blessed” (18), the sons of Jacob went down to Egypt and lived there for 430 years. As for the residence of the children of Israel, which they resided in Egypt, it was four hundred and thirty years” (19).

In presenting his fourth theory of the origin of the Jews, Tacitus, for the first time, expressly indicates that he presents a hypothesis favorable to the Jews, that the Jews are of illustrious origin, being (Solymi), a people celebrated in the poems of Homer, who founded a city and called it the Holy House (Jerusalem) (Hierosolyma) and emphasizing that the Jews are descended from Indian philosophers, he tried to connect them with (Solymi, based on the similarity with the name of the main city of the Jews Jerusalem (20), this theory, in fact, is complementary to the Jews, because the Solymi are the people of Asia Minor who fought Against them is the famous Bellerophon, and the venerable Homer described them as glorious. Placing the Jews side by side with the Solimi strengthens their claim to antiquity (21), which is the same conviction that Aristotle established in his writings, where he says, “These people were descended from the lineage of Indian philosophers, and these philosophers were as They say they are known to the Indians as Kalanoi(22), a theory supported by the historian Megasthenes (ca. 350-290 BC), a contemporary of Seleucus Nicator. He describes the Jews as philosophers in the third book of his book Indica: “The ancient philosophers were found outside ancient Greece, some among the Indian Brahmans and others in Syria among those who are called Jews” (23).

Tacitus's last theory is that the Jews were originally from Ethiopia in the time of King Cepheus (24), forced by fear and hatred to emigrate and search for a new home. Tacitus refrains from making a decision in favor of any one of the five theories he mentioned.

As for the historian Apollonius Molon (first century BC), he mentioned accounts of the origin of the Jews that contain many historical inaccuracies, as he made the leaders of the twelve Jewish tribes the sons of Isaac, instead of Jacob. He also shortened the period of time between Noah and Abraham, making it Only three generations, instead of the ten generations in the Old Testament. It says, “After the flood, the man who survived (i.e. Noah) left Armenia with his sons, after the people of the country expelled him from his home. After crossing the dividing lands, he came to the uninhabited mountainous part of Syria, and after three generations Abraham was born, whose name means, by interpretation, “the lover of the father.” He became wise, sought after the desert,

after taking two wives, one, a local relative, and the other an Egyptian. He had twelve sons from the Egyptians, who left for the countryside. The Arabian Peninsula, and they divided the land among themselves, and they were the first to rule as kings over the people of that country. Abraham had one son, whose name in Greek is Gelos (Isaac). Abraham died of old age. He had eleven sons from Gelos (Isaac) and his mother's wife, and the twelfth. The youngest of them was Joseph, his grandson was Moses (25).

When discussing this text, we find many historical inaccuracies in it. According to the Biblical story, Noah saved his wife, his sons, and his sons' wives from the flood, "So Noah, his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives with him entered the ark from the face of the waters of the flood (26)." Polonius mentions that Abraham took with him two local wives and an Egyptian. According to him, this contradicts historical facts, as the Prophet Abraham only took his wife Sarah with him when he immigrated, and it was mentioned in the Old Testament that Hebron's journey to the land of Canaanites is said: Hebron migrated with his wife Sarah to Egypt because of the drought that struck the land of the Canaanites, in addition to the fact that she was barren at the time. Exodus: "And Sarai was barren and had no child" (27). It appears that Polonius confuses Isaac with his son Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes. He also describes Moses as the grandson of Joseph, but according to the Book of Exodus, Moses is attributed to Levi, Joseph's brother (28).

Apollonius Molon does not seem to have been influenced by the Greek-Egyptian tradition of the origins of the Jewish people because the negativity of this passage betrays Molon's well-documented hatred of the Jews. According to Josephus, the main transmitter of quotes from Molon's writings, the latter not only accused Moses (peace be upon him) of being an imposter, a fraud, and a cheat. Not only did Jewish law teach nothing good, but he also described the Jews as "the worst of the barbarians," a sentiment later echoed by his most famous elite student, Cicero, who described the Jews as a nation born to be slaves (29).

We note through our research that Abraham did not receive any mention in any of the surviving Greek treatises on Jewish history and customs, those written, respectively, by the historian Diodorus of Sicily and the geographer Strabo, as well as by Hecatus, who never mentions him. The reason for this omission is that both historians believed that the character The main foundational foundation of Judaism was Moses (peace be upon him), even a study of the Jews, did not find a place for Abraham in his account of the origins of the Jews and their institutions.

This absence of Abraham by some Greek and Latin authors does not mean, however, that Abraham did not appear at all in Greek and Latin literature. Many writings, preserved as citations in the works of later authors, briefly show the character of Abraham. Berossus refers to Abraham (on him Peace) without naming him when he said that; "In the tenth generation after the flood, there was among the Chaldeans a righteous and great man skilled in the knowledge of the heavens, (30)".

## Conclusion

After the clear difference between Greek and Roman historians in the historical origins of the Jewish people, the origins of Judaism go back more than 3,500 years. This religion is rooted in the ancient eastern region of Canaan, where Judaism developed from the beliefs and practices of the people known as "Israel", what is considered classical or... Rabbiniically, Judaism traces its origins to Abraham, and Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share such an Abrahamic heritage that they are often referred to as Abrahamic religions. The primary figures of Israeli culture include the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophet Moses, who received God's Torah at Mount Sinai.

## Margins

- (1) Josephus, Flavius, Complete works, Printed in the united states of America second Printing, February (1988), book1, P. 34.
- (2) Lynn Calvert, Nancy, Abraham Traditions in Middle Jewish Literature: Implications for the Interpretation of Galatians and Romans(Department of Biblical Studies The University of Sheffield February, 1993)pp.138-139.
- (3) Genesis 12:7.
- (4) Watson, Francis, Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith (2 Ed, UK & USA, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016) p.233.
- (5) Josephus, Complete, book 1, P.38.
- (6) Josephus, Flavius, Complete works, (Chapter 7.2) p.70.
- (7) Duke. Younge, Charles, The Works of Philo Judaeus (London, H.G. Bohn, 1854-1890) Hypothetica: Apology for the Jews: 6.1 <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/younge/book37.html>
- (8) Sean A. Adams and Zanne Domoney-Lyttle, Abraham in Jewish and Early Christian Literature (T&T Clark 2019) p.75.
- (9) Tacitus, Histories, Book V, C2, p.179 [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Tacitus/Histories/5A\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Tacitus/Histories/5A*.html).
- (10) Herodotus, Histories , Book 7.171.
- (11) The legend says that the goddess (Europe) was the daughter of the King of Sidon and the sister of Cadmus (who is credited with inventing the Phoenician alphabet). She was a Phoenician princess, one of the most famous mistresses of Zeus and the one after whom the continent of Europe was named. Zeus seduced her by turning him into a beautiful white bull that entered her father's herd. When she was picking roses with her companions, and when they saw the very beautiful bull, they petted him and patted him, and Europe sat on his back.

Zeus hurried and ran towards the sea and swam to the island of Crete, revealed his identity and told her that he loved her. Europe became the first queen of the island of Crete, and there she gave birth to Minos, who became the king of Crete. See: Sami, Sharif, *A Brief History of Europe* (Cairo, Dar Dawn Publishing and Distribution, 2023 AD), p. 10.

(12) Feldman, H. Louis, *Jewish Life and Thought among Greeks and Romans: Primary Readings* (USA, T&T Clark Ltd, 1996) p.106.

(13) Mantheo of Samnoudi: He was the high priest of Heliopolis at the beginning of the Ptolemaic era in Egypt. Mantheo occupied a unique and prestigious position in his time and even now because he wrote an important work in the Greek language about the history and civilization of Egypt and dedicated it to King Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-246 BC). See: Abdel-Ghani, Muhammad Al-Sayyid, *The Hyksos and the Jews in Egypt according to Manton Al-Samanudi: A critical study of the novel by Josephus* (research published in the *Journal of the Egyptian Historian*, No. 56, 2020 AD), p. 11.

(14) He was known to the Greeks as Bochoris "or "Bochoris" (in Egyptian Pak-en-Ra Neph) (725 to 720 BC) Founder of the Twenty-Fourth Dynasty of Egypt. He ruled for six years. Manetho is considered the only king in this dynasty. He issued a law named after him. He collected in his law the legal systems that were prevalent in his time. See: Omar, Saman Fawzi, *Legal Benefits in Light of Religious Beliefs and Economic Requirements: An Analytical Study Compared to Iraqi Legislation* (Research published in *Voice of Law Magazine*, No. 6, 2016 AD) p. 147.

(15) The priestess of the Temple of Apolloa in Greek mythology at Delphi, she delivered messages from the gods to those seeking advice. look : Oracle of Apollo - The Free Dictionary: [https://www.thefreedictionary.com/Oracle+ of+ Apollo](https://www.thefreedictionary.com/Oracle+of+Apollo).

(16) Cornelius Tacitus, *The History*, Book V, chapter 3

(17) Isis is an ancient Egyptian goddess who became the most famous and enduring of all the gods because she was considered the mother of every pharaoh through the king's association with Horus, the son of Isis. look : Joshua J. Mark Isis - *World History Encyclopedia*(19 February 2016) <https://www.worldhistory.org/isis/>

(18) Genesis 12:4.

(19) Exodus 12:40.

(20) Jerusalem: This name came from the original inhabitants of the land, who were the Canaanites (Yero-Shalem) (Yero-Shalem), and Shalem or Shalem, the name of the Canaanite God and meaning peace. This name came in the Torah and was derived from the original Canaanite name, and it was called Shalem or Salem (the city of God). (City of Judah) (City of the Great King) (City of David) for more details. See: Al-Ahmad, *Ancient History of Palestine*, p. 76; Susa, *The Arabs and the Jews*, pp. 338-399.

- (21) Feldman, H.Louis: Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World (New Jersey Princeton University Press, 1993) p.191
- (22) Josephus, Against Epion (Ancient Antiquities of the Jews) Trans.: Muhammad Hamdi Ibrahim (1st edition, Cairo, Egyptian Publications Office, 2007 AD), vol. 1-2, p. 82.
- (23) Stoneman, Richard, Megasthenes' Indica; A New Translation of the Fragments with Commentary(New York, Routledge, 2022) P.74.
- (24) Cepheus, or the king of Ethiopia, is the name of a planet of large size that Indian astronomers call Capia, and perhaps this was the ancient Egyptian name, from which the Greeks derived the term (Cepheus). It is believed that Cepheus is a king from mythology and there is no for him . For more details about this planet in the beliefs of ancient peoples. look: The Classical Journal, Vol. VI(London, Printed By: A. J. Valpy, Took's Court, Chancery Lane, 1812) PP.8-9.
- (25) Shmuel Safrai, Stern, David Flusser, W.C. van Unnik. The Jewish People in the First Century ( Vo 2: Historical Geography )( Printed in The Netherlands by Van Gorcum, Assen 1976) p.
- (26) Genesis 7:7.
- (27) Genesis 11:30.
- (28) Exodus 6: 16-20.
- (29) Williams, M. Abraham in Contemporary Greek and Latin Authors. Abraham in Jewish and Early Christian Literature (2019). p. 170.
- (30) Josephus, Flavius, Complete works, (Chapter 7.2) p.70.