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The first Christian kernels and the dissemination of Christianity in Crete

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Introduction

In this paper we will try to shed light on the early Christian community and how it was formed in Crete. We will examine who were the first nuclei of this community, their origins, and finally, reference will be made to the action of the Apostle Titus and his teacher, Paul, within the historical context of the 1st century AD. The texts we will be based on are the Jewish inscriptions found in Gortyn, the descriptions we have of Philo the Jew and Flavius Josephus, the reference to the Jews of Crete by Tacitus, and for Titus's action and life, we will build on the letter to Titus of the New Testament and two subsequent occult texts on the life of Titus, one of which was written around the 9th century AD. and another one that was written around the 15th century, presenting some minor differences from its earlier text.

Jews in Crete

In a study attempting to shed light on the beginning of the Jewish presence in Crete, Stylianos Spyridakis¹ concludes that Jews have existed in Gortys since the Hellenistic period, due to the close relations between Crete and the Ptolemaic kingdom. The interactions between the two cultures were constant² and in this context it is quite possible that activists in all areas of Egyptian Jewry settled in Gortyn within these contexts. The Jews of Cyrene are likely to reach Gortys after the creation of the Crete and Cyrenean provinces by Metellus in 67 BC.

Concerning the Jewish inscriptions found in Crete, found in the larger sphere of Gortyn's influence, there is a strong presence of Jews and late antiquity with inscriptions from the 3rd to the 5th centuries placing Jews in the south of Heraklion today. A very useful tombstone inscription for us was found in Kastelli Kissamou and is dated between the 4th and 5th century, specifically referring to a Sophia Gortynia Presbyterian and Archbishop. As S.Spyridakis correctly concludes, this inscription shows us the importance of the Jewish community in Gortyn even to late antiquity³, where the empire had clearly adopted the Christian doctrine.

References in Philo the Jew and Flavius Josephus

The references to the Jewish presence in Crete in these two historians of the 1st century AD. are not many, but they are useful. Filon does not give us information about the Jewish community of Crete, but he briefly expresses his view as a Neo-Platonist of Alexandria, who

¹ Stylianos Spyridakis, *Notes of the Jews of Gortyna and Crete*, Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 73, 1988, 171–175.

² We must not forget that Ptolemy Philopator built a defensive wall in Gortys at 220 BC.

³ Spyridakis, 1988, 174.

certainly interprets myths allegorically⁴. He describes the myth of Minos and Pasiphae and the birth of Minotaur by Pasiphae after she had intercourse with a bull, to show the insanity of human nature and soul when she is possessed by unrepentant and unreasonable passion.

Josephus mentions in the second book of his work on the Jewish War about the "Jews living in Crete"⁵, while in chapter 7 of his work on *Judaic Archaeology*⁶, he describes how Jewish generals used mercenary warriors for their business (165 BC). Both passages refer to events that took place in the middle of the 2nd century BC. thus, making it safe to assume that the Jewish community of Crete was strong in the 2nd century BC. and that the mercenaries recruited were the most likely Jews of Crete.

References in Tacitus

In the 26th chapter of his 3rd book of *Annals*⁷, Tacitus makes a general historical reference to the past, referring to primitive human civilizations, which he compares with the civilized societies of his time and of the recent past. It is of interest to the scholar to note who names Tacitus as the first founding legislators of the civilized legal world. He speaks of Minos of Crete, Lycurgus of Sparta, and Athenian Solon.

In the second chapter of his 5th book of *Histories*⁸, he mentions the origins of the Jews and their mythological origins. He mentions that the Jews were originally banished from Crete and took refuge in the most remote parts of Libya when Zeus defeated and ousted Saturn. He goes on to say that the name *Ioudaioi* is a barbarism of the name *Idaioi*, which comes from the mountain already known to all of us today, *Psiloritis*. If we look at the time that Tacitus writes, that is, in the 1st century AD. We can assume the existence of a strong Jewish presence in the region at this time, a hypothesis confirmed by the example of Titus the Apostle.

Saint Titus and his life

Starting with the study of the life of Saint Titus, it is mandatory to study Apostle Paul's letter to Titus. This letter makes no mention of Titus' life before Paul was sent back to Crete to spread Christianity⁹. On the contrary, we have information on how Titus should place bishops

⁴ The Special laws III, VIII, paragraphs 43-44.

⁵ Φλάβιος Ιώσηπος, *Ιστορία του Ιουδαϊκού πολέμου προς Ρωμαίους*. Αρχαία Ελληνική Γραμματεία «Οι Έλληνες», Κάκτος 1997, βιβλίο 2^ο, κεφάλαιο 7.

⁶ Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Translated by William Whiston, Echo Library, 2006, 402.

⁷ Tacitus, *Histories: Books 4-5. Annals: Books 1-3*. Translated by Clifford H. Moore, John Jackson. Loeb Classical Library 249. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931, 563.

⁸ Ibid, 177.

⁹ Cretans are Κρήτες αεί ψευῆσαι, κακά θηρία, γαστέρες ἀργαί'', according to Saint Paul in his letter to Titus, in the 13th paragraph of the first letter. Cretans don't accept the "healthy faith" (*ygii pisti*)

in specific cities to spread " healthy teaching ", while Paul's other " commandments " to Titus mainly concern the field of moral education, emphasizing what values should apply to young people, women, the elderly and slaves. Important for the present work is the fact that paragraph 10 of the first letter refers to " circumcised " Cretans, who are other than the Jews of the region, most likely inhabitants of Gortyn.

Unfolding who Titus actually was before he took up his apostolic duty and how he acted, who his contemporaries were and what their experiences were, we come to the 9th century text which is essentially a hagiographic biography quite extensive in relation to everything by the letter of the New Testament. This biography was published in Francois Halkin's¹⁰ study and is our only source for Titus' life.

From the beginning of life, it seems that Zenas, allegedly the author of the text, wants to emphasize the origin of Titus, who is a descendant of the legendary Minos. At the age of 20 he hears a voice calling on him to abandon his philosophy and way of life and save his soul from this " no good education ". After this call, Titus devotes nine years to the study of the Hebrew Bible. Crete's proconsul at that time was Titus' uncle, who, after convening a council among the Cretan leaders, sends Tito to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Christ and to see the miracles that he executed by his own eyes. According to the chronicle, Titus was among the 120 disciples who received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The following describes Paul's action with Titus' partnership and the account of the miracles that Paul did in areas, including Damascus and Caesarea. He is ordained by the Apostle Paul; afterwards he visits with two cities of Cyprus, Salamis and Paphos, with Paul and Apostle Barnabas, before turning again to the spread of the word of God in the eastern provinces of the empire.

We know that the second proconsul of Crete mentioned in the text was named Roustillos and had married Titus's sister. Roustillos, therefore, when Titus visits Crete with Paul, urges the two apostles not to oppose the "gods of the Greeks", with Titus answering that if he changes his faith and become Christian, great glory and honour awaits him in Rome. It should be emphasized here that Rustillus becomes a Christian when Paul resurrects his dead son, with Titus' prophecy confirmed and the ex-proconsul of Crete returning to Rome and becoming a

and they do not focus on the truth and the study of the "*Jewish myths*". The phrase is attributed to Epimenides, Cretan and one of the 7 wise men of antiquity.

¹⁰ Francois Halkin, La legende Cretoise de Saint Tite, Analecta Bollandiana. tomus LXXIX, p.241, Bruxelles, 1961, 322-337.

proconsul eventually. In chapter 5 of the *Acta*, Crete's "circumcised" are mentioned, which are - after all - the Jews who lived in Crete and are referred to the letter to Titus.

At this point the *Acta* are synchronized with the events of the letter of the New Testament. Titus completes his teaching under Paul and returns to Crete. He is present at the killing of Paul by Nero on June 29, 67 AD. and from this fact we suppose that he himself assumes his bishopric duty in Crete shortly after 67 AD, at about 55 years of age, bearing in mind that the period witnessing the crucifixion of Christ is about 21 years old. His work was not easy, as the Cretans, as mentioned above, were pagan. When he tries to preach for the first time, he is greeted with pagan customs and celebrations (as he was already an important figure¹¹) and he was very disappointed when he tried to describe to them his experiences and preach Christianity. Not by accident, the only Jews who pay attention are the Jews of the area¹². Following is the ordination of bishops in Knossos, Ierapytna, Kydonia, Hersonissos, Eleftherna, Lampi, Kissamos and Kandanos. Thus, together with Titus, who was bishop of Gortys, the first Christian bishops of Crete are 9. The rest of the text mentions Tito's actions and miracles, the death of Euphemia's sister, and the miraculous qualities of his relic. The timeline closes with a summary of Titus' life. He says he was 20 years old when he went to Jerusalem, lived with Jesus for a whole year, and spent ten years in Judea. He preached the gospel for 18 years after being ordained, while wandering Crete and other islands for six years, until he returned home and lived another 39 years until the end of his life, around 105 AD.

Conclusions

According to Francois Halkin, the time of Titus' life is written before the Arab conquest of Crete and hence before 827/28. For some reason there is a revival of the tradition about Saint Titus at that time, and probably a need to 'rebuild' the past of the first bishop of Crete, through a story that was most likely widespread throughout Crete throughout the period between of Titus' death at the beginning of the 2nd century AD by the time the text is written. If we combine recent archaeological studies of the Church of Saint Titus in Gortys of Crete published in the article by Stavros Mameloukos¹³, and in particular the study of V. Sythiakakis

¹¹ Vir illustris, as described from István Czachesz in *Apostolic Commission Narratives in the Canonical and Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, Groningen, 2002,203.

¹² Since the Apostles preached in urban centers to attract a larger audience, and already aware of the Jewish presence in Gortyn, it is not arbitrary to assume that Titus is Gortynian in origin and preaches in Gortyn, the capital of Crete and Cyrene.

¹³ Σταύρος Μαμαλούκος, *Ζητήματα Αναπαράστασης της Αρχικής Μορφής του Ναού του Αγίου Τίτου στη Γόρτυνα*, Δελτίον της Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας, 34, 2013, 11-24.

Kritsimalli¹⁴ on the architectural sculptures of Saint Titus of Gortyn and their contribution in dating the monument, where the scientist dates the erection of the temple between 796 and 813 AD. and therefore certainly before the Arab conquest, we conclude that Titus' life is in the same time frame as that of his homonymous temple. All this is taking place in the context of the honour of Titus and the revival of the Christian past of Crete and Gortyn in this case, at a time when its glorious days as the capital of Crete *and Cyrenaica* were over. The reason for this to happen at this specific timeframe is not entirely clear. Probably at the beginning of the 9th century, Crete there was still a pagan presence and preservation of pagan customs, which is not strange if one considers the island's history. But we can certainly see that the text is used as a model for the introduction of the new cult, and highlights the positive reception of Christianity by the Greco-Roman upper classes of the 1st century AD, and as István Czachesz concludes, the text contains quite unrealistic, plausible evidence, especially in cases such as that of the Roman proconsul of Gortys sending Titus, an aristocratic pagan, to be taught in Palestine by Jesus¹⁵.

Closing, I would like to dwell on the decisive presence of the Jews of Crete from the Hellenistic period to the late antiquity. They hold positions of importance, are fully in tune with society, and are certain to assist Titus in his effort to spread Christianity to the sceptical Cretans. It is reasonable to point out that without the strong Jewish presence in Crete, Christianity would find even more difficult paths.

¹⁴ Β. Συθιακάκη Κριτσιμάλλη, «Τα αρχιτεκτονικά γλυπτά του Αγίου Τίτου της Γόρτυνας και η συμβολή τους στη χρονολόγηση του μνημείου», 11ο Διεθνές Κρητολογικό Συνέδριο. Proceedings, under publishing.

¹⁵ Czachesz, 2002, 212.

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