The Jews in Egypt

The oldest Jewish community in the world is that of the Egyptian Jews who have been in the area since at least 1700 BC. One of the most well-known Jewish communities, probably a military group, existed at Elephantine Island as early as 650 BC. Many Jews immigrated to the city of Alexandria during the Ptolemaic era. However, of these ancient Jews, very little is known.

Ancient synagogues were probably modeled after local Egyptian temples of the period. No specific remains of very ancient temples have been discovered, but ancient writings tell us of their existence. They appear to have been quite large; records show that one, near the city of Crocodilopolis, occupied two and one-half acres of land.

Although tradition states that a Jewish community existed in Old Cairo since the time of Moses, the oldest documentation of this community is from records written by medieval travelers in the 12th century. One such traveler, Benjamin of Tudela, visited the synagogue and claimed to have seen the Torah of Ezra the Scribe. The first known Synagogue in Old Cairo was probably built somewhere between the 6th or 9th centuries AD. It was destroyed when the Romans took over Egypt. During the time of the Arab conquest in 651AD, the land was given to the Copts, who built a church on the site. The church was later destroyed and, in the 12th century it was again acquired by the Jews. A new synagogue was built on the site by the great Rabbi, Abraham Ben Ezra. This basilica-style temple contains a Jewish heritage library. This is the Synagogue of Ben Ezra (Kanisat al-Shamiyin), located in Old Cairo near the “Hanging Church” and the Church of St. Sergius and Bacchus. Today, it is one of the most interesting sacred sites of Old Cairo.

In 1896, a collection of ancient manuscripts, known as the Geniza documents, was found in the synagogue. A geniza is a place in which obsolete paperwork would be discarded. As many as 250,000 documents were found here, including an ancient Torah which dates to the 5th century. It was written on gazelle skin. Another document contains a drawing of a seven-branched candlestick, worked into deer skin. This ancient Torah was, unfortunately, split up and now portions of it are in both Europe and America. The other found documents reflected political, economic, and social conditions of the Jews under Arab rule.

At the back of the synagogue there is a very deep well. It is generally believed that this is the place where the coffers, in which the Baby Moses was placed by his mother, were found.

For many years the Jews lived and worked in Egypt. They remained, however, a community within a community and spoke mainly French and were generally not a part of the Egyptian culture. After the partition of Palestine and Israel in 1948, many Jews were arrested, but it was mainly for Zionist activities. Another 600 or so were detained in three major camps. Many were arrested simply because they had family in Israel. (Remember that during World War II, Japanese Americans were similarly detained in the United States). Although conditions at these camps were terrible, nothing supersedes the suffering of the Jews under of the hands of the Nazis.
In 1954, Zionist activities broke out in Egypt. Many bombings were planned and many carried out. These Egyptian Jewish saboteurs, however, were quickly apprehended. At one of the trials, the prosecutor summarized his view of the situation in his concluding statement: "The Jews of Egypt are living among us and are sons of Egypt. Egypt makes no difference between its sons whether Moslems, Christians, or Jews. These defendants happen to be Jews who reside in Egypt, but we are trying them because they committed crimes against Egypt, although they are Egypt's sons." One editor of an Arabic-French pro-Zionist asked of a Rabbi, "Please explain to our brothers that one can be an excellent patriot of the country of one's birth while being a perfect Jewish nationalist. One does not exclude the other." The Rabbi did not accede to this request. The divisions between Arab and Jew now grew steadily.

During the Suez War in 1956, there was a great flow of Jews leaving Egypt. Jews with foreign passports were assisted by their consulates to get their exit visas, while some non-Egyptian Jews were forced to leave the country but could not recover their property. Those that did leave, particularly the foreigners, could take with them only twenty Egyptian pounds per person. It is estimated that more than 30,000 Jews fled the country, receiving help from the World Jewish Congress, the Red Cross, and The Jewish Agency. By the following year, of the original 80,000 Jews living in Egypt, only about 3,000 remained.

The Ben Ezra Synagogue is still open for Jewish services. Today, however, the Jewish population in Egypt is only about 100. Most of these people are very old, and it has been said that, in the near future, the only Jews in Egypt will be tourists.