

NUMERICS OF HEBREWS WORLDWIDE DISTRIBUTION AROUND 1170 AD ACCORDING TO BINYAMIN OF TUDELA

by

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Summary

We present data on the world distribution of the Hebrews around 1170 AD as found in the book *Itinerary* of Binyamin of Tudela. The data show about half of the Hebrews living in the Yemen region, in agreement with the recent thesis of Kamal Salibi that the original land of the Hebrews was the western-southern Arabian peninsula.

In three recent monographs prof. Kamal Salibi, a leading historian of the Arab world, a Christian professor at the American Lebanese University in Beirut, on mainly geographical reasons has claimed that the land where the Hebrews lived between the time of Abraham and the deportation to the East by Assirians and Babilonians, was not Palestine but a territory in present day Asir, i.e. on a high plateau of south-western Arabian peninsula, a region well watered and fertile. According to him only a fraction of the Hebrews went to Palestine when they got from Cyrus the Great the freedom to dwell where they liked, while most of them returned to their original land. The reason why some Hebrews settled in Palestine is given by Salibi as related to the commercial importance taken by Palestine during Persian empire, such land being located on the way between the main economical centers of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Around 1170 AD. the rabbi Binyamin of Tudela began a three years travel to visit many of the Hebrews communities in the world. In his travel report he lists the numbers of Hebrews living in the cities he visited. In this paper we provide such numbers, whose analyses fully corroborates prof. Salibi thesis on the ancient location of the Hebrews. Indeed less than 3% of the Hebrews are listed by Binyamin to live in Europe or Africa, almost 50% are attributed to Arabia and Yemen, and the remaining are found in Mesopotamia, Persia and India. It appears therefore that possibly about half of the Hebrews returned to their original land, while most of the remaining settled in the eastern part of the Persian empire, when given by Cyrus freedom choosing their dwelling place.

IN A SERIES OF RECENT BOOKS the Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi [1,2,3] has argued that before their deportation to Mesopotamia (the people of Israel by Sargon in 722 BC, the people of Juda by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC), the Hebrews were a coalition of Arab tribes living in the

high land (the Al-Sarat, elevation between 1700 and 3200 meters) of western-southern Arabian peninsula (approximately in the Asir region of present day Saudi Arabia). It is known that when Cyrus let the Hebrews free of leaving Mesopotamia, only a limited amount of them, belonging to the Juda and

Levi tribes, went to Palestine, reconstructing the temple in the city of Jerusalem. The fate of the remaining ten tribes has been object of lot of discussions, e.g. by Velikovsky (he proposed the Caucasus, the Volga region and a third indetermined destination, see [4]), by Koestler (he claimed that many people around the Caspian sea at the time of the Khazars empire were Hebrews and that most of Eastern Europe Jews descended from them, see [5]). The arguments given by Salibi are based on the geography in the biblical books dealing with the period preceding the deportation. He notices that almost all the about 2000 toponima appearing in these books can be found in the Asir region. Moreover additional data given in the biblical text, as distances, proximity to rivers and mountains etc., are supported by the Asir localization. Only a handful of such toponima can be located in Palestine where moreover some topographical features are often incompatible with statements in the Bible.

Salibi bases his analysis on the so called "received text" of the Bible, namely the original version containing only consonants. He claims that the current vocalization, made by the Masoretes over 1000 years after the exile, is often not correct. Among his remarkable claims we recall: -- "Jordan (h-yrdn) river" is a wrong translation for "ridge", referring to the great almost impassable rocky escarpment, having a sheer drop of some 100 meters, that separates the Arabian high plateau from the lower land by the sea. This escarpment stretches almost continuously for about 1000 km from just south of Meccah to near Aden, additional long stretches extending parallel to the south coast of the Arabian peninsula (see the map at pages 32-33 of The Times Atlas of the World, comprehensive edition, 1973). Additionally one should note that in the Bible the Jordan is never explicitly called a " river (nhr)", a fact that has always puzzled scholars.

Jerusalem is never associated with the term "city" and its 26 gates are highly improbable, since a city of its size would normally have no more than 4 gates, the great cities of antiquities having usually at most 12 gates. "Jerusalem" is identified by Salibi as a secluded well defended natural area in the Arabian high plateau having 26 natural accesses, 24 of which are found on maps still bearing their ancient biblical name.

Only some of the Jews settled in Palestine with the favour of the Persians in the sixth century BC, when Palestine suddenly became important from the trade point of view in the context of the Persian empire, being located between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Salibi does not discuss the fate of the other Hebrews, but notices that a large amount of them was well known to have dwelled in the Arabian peninsula in medieval times and that the opinion expressed by these dwellers of being in their fathers land was recorded by several medieval authors. It is worth to recall that one of the main historians of Islam, the Persian Al Tabari who wrote in the ninth century, describes a large number of fortified villages in the region of the city of Iathrib (later redennominated Al Madinah), whose population consisted of Hebrews in control of the cultivations of dates. One of the first acts of the political activity of Muhammad was fighting against them.

In this paper we look at very interesting information on the distribution of the Hebrews in the world given in the book *Itinerary* by Binyamin of Tudela, a little known important source that is not quoted by Salibi. The data provide clear support to Salibi's thesis.

The travels of Binyamin of Tudela

THE RABBI BINYAMIN OF TUDELA lived in the 12-th century in the city of Tudela in Aragona, not far from Saragosse. Around

1170 AD he underwent a trip that lasted about three years along the coasts of the Mediterranean and inside parts of Asia, visiting the local communities of Hebrews. He gave a quite synthetic description of his travels in the book *Itinerary* [6]. This book has little information about his personal events but is curiously rich in data about the number of Hebrews that were living in the cities he visited (or possibly in some cities he did not visit but was given information about). There has been of course discussion about the accuracy of the figures given by him and someone has even claimed that the trip was not done at all. Here we are not going to enter such type of discussion. Our personal impression is that the text is essentially accurate. Binyamin therefore may provide invaluable information on a time where the world distribution of the Hebrews could still be considered as a good reflection of the

Hebrews in Spain, France and Italy

GERONA	300
LUNEL	300
POSQUIERES	40
ST. GILLES	100
ARLES	200
MARSEILLES	300
PISA	20
LUCCA	40
ROMA	200
CAPUA	300
NAPOLI	500
SALERNO	600
AMALFI	20
BENEVENTO	200
MELFI	200
ASCOLI SATRIANO	40
TRANI	200
TARANTO	300
BRINDISI	10
OTRANTO	500
TOTAL	4370

distribution in classical times. Not long after Binyamin time persecutions in Europe and the onslaught due to the Mongols modified the distribution of the Hebrews in Europe and especially in much of Asia.

In the following section we give Tables listing the number of people living in various regions of the world visited by Binyamin. Then we will comment on them and discuss the data relation with Salibi thesis.

Tables of Hebrews distribution in the world

In the following Tables we list the cities for which Binyamin provides the number of Hebrews (without his distinctions between rabbanites, i.e. followers of the rabbinic teaching giving importance to the Talmud, and caraites, followers of the original precepts in the canonical biblical books). For a small number of cities or places (e.g. Barcelona or Cyprus) Binyamin does not provide figures.

Hebrews in Greece

CORFU	1
ARTA	100
ACHELOO	30
PATRAS	50
KIFTO	100
CRISSA	100
CORINTH	300
THEBES	2000
EGRIPO	200
IABUSTRISSA	200
RABENIKA	100
SINON POTAMOU	50
ARMILO	400
BISSENA	100
SALONICA	500
DEMETRIZI	200
DRAMA	140
CRISTOPOLI	20
COSTANTINOPLES	2500
RODOSTO	400
GALLIPOLI	200
KALES	50
CHIOS	400
SAMOS	300
RHODES	400
TOTAL	8841

Hebrews in Siria and Palestine

ANTIOCH	10
LATAKIA	100
BYBLOS	250
BEIRUT	50
SIDON	50
TYRE	500
AKKO	200
CAESAREA	200
JERUSALEM	200
BETHLEHEM	2
BEIT GIBRIN	3
BETHNABLE	3
RAMAH	300
YAFO	1
ASQUELON	240
LUDD	1
TIBERIAS	50
GUSH	20
ALMAH	50
DAMASCUS	3100
GALID	60
TADMOR	2000
EMESA	20
HAMA	70
ALEPPO	5000
BALIS	10
QALAT GABER	2000
RAQQA	700
TOTAL	15190

Remark. Binyamin lists separately the Samaritans: 400 in Damascus, 200 in Caesarea, 1000 in Nablus, 300 in Asquelon.

Hebrews in Mesopotamia

HARRAN	20
RAS EL AIN	200
NISIBI	1000
GEZIRET IBN OMAR	4000
MOSUL	7000
RAHBAH	2000
KARKEMISH	500
AL ANBAR	3000
HADARAH	15.000
OKBARA	10.000
BAGHDAD	40.000
ZERIRAN	5000
BAYBAL	3000
AL HILLAH	10.000
KAFRI	200
QUSUNAT	300
AL KUPAH	7000
AL ANBAR	3000
TOTAL	111.220

Remark. Binyamin makes the interesting observation that near Kafri there was an important complex of buildings, including the synagogue and the grave of Ezekiel and a rich library containing scrolls from the first and the second temple.

Hebrews in Arabia and Yemen

TANAI REGION	300.000
TILMAS	100.000
HAIBAR	50.000
DIRAE	3000
LASAS	2000
BASRA	10.000
TOTAL	465.000

Remark. The Tanai region had 40 cities and 200 villages. The whole region is called by him Saba or Al-Yemen, meaning „the South“, with respect to Shinar (i.e. Mesopotamia).

Hebrews in Greater Persia

NAHR SAMURAH	1500
SUSA	7000
RUDBAR	20.000
HULWAN	4.000
AMADIYAH	25.000
HAMADAN	30.000
TABARISTAN	4000
ISFAHAN	15.000
FIRUZEH	10.000
HIVA	80.000
SAMARKANDA	50.000
QIS	500
QATIF	5000
TOTAL	252.000

Hebrews in Greater India

QULAM	100.000
LABRIG	3000
AL GONGALAH	1000
TOTAL	104.000

Hebrews in Africa and Sicily

HELUAN	300
KUS	300
FAYYUM	200
CAIRO	7000
BILBEIS	300
BUTIG	200
BENHA	60
MINYAT ZIFTA	500
SAMNU	200
DAMIRAH	700
MAHALLAH	500
ALEXANDRIA	3000
DAMIETTA	200
SIMASIM	100
TANIS	40
PALERMO	1500
TOTAL	15.000

Total and area percentages

TOTAL	975.621
AFRICA-SICILY	1.5%
INDIA	10.6%
PERSIA	25.8%
MESOPOTAMIA	11.4%
ARABIA-YEMEN	47.7%
SIRIA-PALESTINE	1.6 %
EUROPE	1.4 %

In addition to the above numbers, Binyamin quotes without figures the existence of Hebrews in Germany and in the Khazar empire. Also he claims that a "large number" of Hebrews were living in a mountainous territory that appears to broadly correspond to Afghanistan. Curiously he omits figures about Andalucia. We recall that according to Koestler the number of Hebrews in Germany before the end of the Khazar empire was marginal while it was probably substantial in the Khazar empire, whose leaders had converted to Hebraism ("in Khazaria sheep, honey and Jews exist in large quantities", is a statement by Muqaddasi in his 10th century "Descriptio Imperii Moslemici"). The Khazar empire was already in decay at the time of Binyamin, due to growth of the Rus power and the many incursions of Vikings along the Caspian shores. Koestler argues that people from the Khazar territory escaped west flying the terrible Mongolian invasion. Many of them set in the wooded and marshy territory between present day Poland and White Russia. From them, and not from Hebrews expelled from the western European countries, the large population of Eastern Jews should have descended.

Comments on Binyamin data

WE DO NOT KNOW HOW the numbers given by Binyamin relate to the actual total population of Hebrews at his time, because of the following questions: A -- do the numbers refer to the whole population or only to the male adults? Some passages suggest that only male adults were considered B -- how many people lived in cities or regions not touched by him? Because of the above, even assuming that the given figures are basically correct, the total number of Hebrews corresponding to these figures, i.e. somewhat less than one million, is certainly a lower bound, by possibly a factor 4 with respect to problem A and a factor 2 or more with respect to problem B. By these factors one might estimate a total population of somewhat over 8 million, which is a reasonable estimate, being close to the numbers of Jews for the whole Roman world at the Augustus census (the Hebrews were the most numerous population!). At that time only part of the world inhabited by Hebrews had been censused, but economical conditions were probably better generally than at Binyamin time, allowing a higher population density in the Roman empire. It is anyway well known that human population has been rather constant in total numbers till the explosive growth related to the starting of the industrial revolution.

One should also notice that most Hebrews lived in cities or small towns on jobs requiring a certain specialized competence (making or colouring clothes is an occupation often quoted by Binyamin).

Despite the certain inaccuracy in total numbers, it is likely that the ratios of Hebrews in different geographical areas are quite correct, since such ratios are independent of the multiplying factors, which are presumably similar for the different regions. Therefore the following observations coming from an

inspection of the above given Tables should be basically valid.

* the region of Arabia and Yemen contains about half the total population of Hebrews. This fact is a strong argument in favour of Salibi thesis that Arabia-Yemen was the original region where the Hebrews were deported from by the Assyrians and the Babilonians, since many of the deportees would naturally like to come back to the land of their ancestors

* the region containing the second largest amount of Hebrews is Greater Persia, at the time of Binyamin including a large part of central Asia now belonging to Turkmenistan, Tagikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan. Impressive is the large number of Hebrews living in Hiva, close to the Aral see, a region now environmentally ruined but in medieval times very flourishing, as described for instance by Ibn Battuta. It is natural to conjecture that such large population descended from people who settled there during the Persian Achaemenid empire, when the Hebrews were treated well by the Persians and many of them acted as administrators. It is likely that large part of the population of these cities was later massacred by the Mongols, whose policy of utterly destroying the inhabitants of cities is so graphically described in for instance Ata Malik al Juvaini, [7], writing about 1250 AD. It is however possible that a part of these populations, possibly those living in the more western regions, e.g. in Hiva, could have escaped the Mongols onslaught by joining the Khazars in their flight towards Europe, thereby contributing to the stock of Eastern European Jews

* India is the region containing the third largest population of Hebrews, with a concentration in the city of Qulam, present day Quilon, in the western-southern part of the Indian peninsula. Under Salibi's scenario

of the Hebrews living originally in Southern Arabia it is likely that many of them formed colonies already in very ancient times in that part of India, which was on the way to the farthest eastern regions wherefrom spices and silk were imported. It is well known that trade between Taprobrane (Sri Lanka) and Oman or Aden is extremely ancient, being practiced exploiting the monsoons by boats made of planks connected with coconut fiber ropes, a production of the Laccadive islands (see Severin [8] for a description of these boats and his personal experience of crossing the Indian ocean from Oman on a reconstructed boat). The Hebrews population of India might also have been increased some centuries before Binyamin by influx of refugees from west-northern parts of India, that were once part of the Achaemenid empire and where the Islamic conquest was quite bloody, due to the local resistance to religious change (see again Ibn Battuta for a description of the massacres made by the muslim chiefs against the nonmuslim populations in the region of present Chittagong). Notice that the migrations of Zoroastrians to the quite southern location of present Mumbai was as well motivated by escape to forced conversion.

* the region containing the third largest amount of Hebrews includes present day Siria, Irak and southern Turkey. It can be surmised that this population consisted partly of Hebrews that decided to stay there during the time of the Persian Achaemenid empire, partly of people who went there during the best time of the Islamic empire, partly of people who left Palestine after the Roman wars of Vespasian and Hadrian. Again much of this population may have perished during the massacres of city dwellers by the Mongols. It is clear from the information in Binyamin that most precious cultural relicts of the Hebrews were preserved in cities near Baghdad. These were most probably destroyed together with the population during

the Mongolian invasion.

* the number of people living in Europe, in the Byzantine empire and along the Mediterranean coasts of Africa, namely in the regions where we would expect most of the Hebrews under the standard hypothesis that the original land of the Hebrews was Palestine, wherefrom they dispersed during Hellenistic and Roman times, is only a small fraction of the total Hebrew population according to Binyamin figures. Barring the hypothesis of a higher mortality in these regions in some past time (but earthquakes and plague around 540 AD devastated these

regions....) this fact supports the idea that already in classical times the Hebrews living around the Mediterranean were only a small fraction of the total population of Hebrews.

THE ABOVE ANALYSIS, in conclusion, seems to support Salibi's hypothesis that only a marginal part of the Hebrews, when given freedom by Cyrus, settled in Palestine; most of them must have returned to their original land in Arabia--Yemen, or they dispersed in the vastness of the Achaemenid empire, where history later spread them even farther throughout the world.

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Riassunto

In tre recenti importanti monografie il prof. Kamal Salibi, un cristiano libanese docente l'American Lebanese University e direttore dell' Interfaith Study Centre di Amman, sulla base di considerazioni in parte linguistiche ma principalmente geografiche, ha sostenuto la tesi che la terra dove vivevano gli Ebrei fra il tempo di Abramo e la deportazione da parte degli Assiri (Sargon, 722 BC) e dei Babilonesi (Nebuchadnezzar, 587 BC) non fosse la Palestina ma un territorio sull' altipiano della penisola arabica sud-occidentale, nell' attuale regione dell' Asir, a nord dello Yemen. Secondo Salibi la Palestina sarebbe stata occupata da un limitato numero di Ebrei che decisero di stanziarsi cola' quando Ciro il Grande diede alle popolazioni deportate il permesso di stabilirsi dove volevano, in quanto la Palestina era divenuta durante l'impero persiano una regione di grande interesse commerciale, trovandosi sulla via di transito fra le due regioni principali, Egitto e Mesopotamia.

Attorno al 1170 il rabbino spagnolo Beniamino da Tudela inizio' un viaggio di tre anni che lo porto' a visitare molte delle comunita' di Ebrei nel mondo. Nel libro che scrisse diede il numero degli Ebrei viventi nelle varie citta' visitate ed in altre su cui ebbe informazione. Una analisi dei dati da lui riferiti conferma pienamente l' ipotesi di Salibi. Infatti meno del 3% degli Ebrei sono assegnati all' Europa ed all' Africa, quasi il 50% all' Arabia e lo Yemen, ed il resto principalmente alla Mesopotamia, Persia ed India. Tale distribuzione di popolazione suggerisce che una meta' circa degli Ebrei al tempo di Ciro il Grande decise di rientrare nella terra originaria, e che la maggior parte degli altri resto' invece nelle province orientali dell' impero persiano, probabilmente nella Battriana (attuale Afghanistan), dove le condizioni climatiche ed orografiche erano simili a quelle dell' Asir, con successiva probabile dispersione verso l' India e l' Asia Centrale ai tempi dell' arrivo dell' Islam con le sue forzate conversioni.

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