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Abraham Wasserstein and David J. Wasserstein

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## THE LEGEND OF THE SEPTUAGINT

The Septuagint is the most influential of the Greek versions of the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The exact circumstances of its creation are uncertain, but different versions of a legend about the miraculous nature of the translation have existed since antiquity. Beginning in the Letter of Aristeas, the legend describes how Ptolemy Philadelphus (285–247 B.C.E.) commissioned seventy-two Jewish scribes to translate the sacred Hebrew scriptures for his famous library in Alexandria. Subsequent variations on the story recount how the scribes, working independently, produced word-for-word, identical Greek versions. In the course of the following centuries, to our own time, the story has been adapted and changed by Jews, Christians, Muslims, and pagans for many different reasons: to tell a story, to explain historical events, and – most frequently – to lend authority to the Greek text for the institutions that used it. This book offers the first account of all of these versions over the last two millennia, providing a history of the uses and abuses of the legend in various cultures around the Mediterranean.

Abraham Wasserstein (born Frankfurt am Main, 1921, died Jerusalem, 1995) taught at the universities of Glasgow and Leicester before taking up in 1969 a chair in Greek at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he stayed until his death in 1995. He had special interests in Greek literature and science, and he wrote widely in these fields. His publications include an edition of the medieval Hebrew translation of Galen's commentary on Hippocrates' *Airs, Waters and Places* (lost in the original Greek). The present book was begun by him and left incomplete at his death.

David J. Wasserstein, A. W.'s son, read classics and oriental studies at Oxford (DPhil 1982). He lectured in Arabic and Hebrew at University College, Dublin, and was professor of Islamic history at Tel Aviv University before taking up a chair of History and of Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tennessee, in 2004. He is the author of *The Rise and Fall of the Party-Kings* (1985) and *The Caliphate in the West* (1993), as well as of many articles on medieval Islamic and Jewish topics.

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# The Legend of the Septuagint

*From Classical Antiquity to Today*

ABRAHAM WASSERSTEIN

DAVID J. WASSERSTEIN

*Vanderbilt University*



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*Dávid Iván*

*30 January 1935 Újpest, Hungary*

*1944 Auschwitz*

*nephew and cousin*

יהי זכרו ברוך

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*What is Plato but Moses speaking in Attic?*

Numenius of Apamea (2nd century C.E.)

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is an essay in tracing the life of the legend that grew up around the origin of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. It is not concerned, except incidentally, with how that translation, surely the most momentous literary enterprise in the annals of western mankind, came into being. The answer to that question is largely unknown and must be sought mainly in the internal evidence of the texts. That task must be left to textual critics and other students of the Greek Old Testament. What is presented here is an analysis of the legend of the original translation of the Pentateuch.

As far as our evidence allows us to judge, the legend of the Pentateuch has its beginning in the *Letter of Aristeas*. We have attempted to examine the embellishments that later generations added to the story as told in that work. Commentators, apologists and polemicists belonging to different traditions, in Jewish hellenism and in rabbinic Jewry no less than in the Christian churches and in the world of Islam, often used the legend for partisan purposes. Their additions were inspired by various theological and sectarian interests, and they created narrative patterns, literary motifs and models of special pleading that lived on for many centuries, occasionally in unexpected places. To this day the legend exerts its power over the formulation of arguments about the inspiration of sacred texts.

The frame-story of the *Letter of Aristeas* is well known: Ptolemy II Philadelphus, ruler of Egypt in the third century B.C.E., was persuaded by Demetrius of Phalerum, Director of the famous Library in Alexandria, to enrich that collection by obtaining a translation of the Jewish Law for the library. Ambassadors were sent to the High Priest in Jerusalem to ask for his help in that enterprise. As proof of his own goodwill towards the Jews, the King ordered that more than one hundred thousand Jewish captives be freed at his expense; in addition, many costly presents were sent to the High Priest. The High Priest despatched seventy-two elders, six chosen from each of the twelve

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tribes, all well versed in both languages, to Alexandria, where they translated the Law in exactly seventy-two days from Hebrew into Greek.

Like the scholar who is studying the history of the Septuagint itself and must examine the texts critically, the reader of the *Aristeas Letter*, too, must keep in mind partisan interests and innocent prejudices, honest misconceptions and pious frauds, doctrinal stubbornness and naive sectarianism. He must study the use to which one interpretation rather than another, one narrative detail added or omitted, could be put to serve now half-forgotten polemical purposes in disputations between Christians and Jews, orthodox and heretics, Jews of various kinds, Christians and Muslims who adhered to related doctrines concerning alleged tampering by Jews (and sometimes Christians) with their holy scriptures, and between Eastern upholders of the inspiration of the Seventy and Latin champions of the *hebraica veritas* which, it was thought, could be found in Jerome's Vulgate.

As far as the data at our disposal allow us to judge, the legend arose from what was originally a work not of religious or sectarian argument but an exercise in hellenistic Jewish apologetics joined to Ptolemaic dynastic propaganda. This became the seedbed, the nursery and the forcing-house for the production of literary artifices that for many centuries, down to our own day, became the underpinning of some Christian theological positions. Defenders of these positions rely on arguments taken from that tradition, even where they no longer argue for the literal truth either of the account contained in the *Letter of Aristeas* or even of the biblical text itself. It is a strange and remarkable fact that patterns of argument that go back to a pre-Christian propaganda work are used to this day by defenders of conservative interpretations of Holy Scripture.

This is an exciting story, not least because it crosses many barriers: of language, of religion, of culture and of geography. But it is also a story fraught with difficulties, arising mostly from the unfamiliarity of much in the cultural and intellectual furniture, the background to what is said; the rabbinic and oriental sources are particularly likely to be new to many readers. We have endeavoured, within the limits of the reasonable, to explain what may be strange expressions and ideas in the course of the book.

A word about method and approach is also in order here. The attempt to track the occurrences of a long series of versions of a well-known and important legend in a wide variety of cultures and linguistic dresses resembles the scholarly collection of surviving fragments of an ancient writer's works; it shares something too of the dangers inherent in such a task, in particular the risk that one will end up looking at bits and pieces of intellectual matter in isolation, not so much from each other as from their real contexts, social and linguistic and cultural. It is, however, only in those contexts and via an awareness of the links among and between all of them that such fragments, whether of an ancient writer or of a legend, possess, develop and transmit their meanings. This

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legend in particular is part of the common heritage of the civilizations clustering around the Mediterranean. Despite the links between many of them provided by the inland sea, the differences among these cultures are also many and varied. The risk of atomisation in the study of these fragments has therefore been ever-present to us in the preparation of this book. We have aimed to show something of the immense variety of this story and of its significance in so many contexts and for so many people and peoples. At the same time, by fixing a concentrated light on a single legend – one small assemblage of narrative elements – as it makes its way through the vagaries of time and space, of language and religion and culture, from Alexandria in the third century B.C.E. to Jerusalem at the start of the twenty-first century, we hope to illuminate something of the common heritage of all who live around this sea.

This book fits, in different ways, into a variety of disciplines. It is not complete. No study can be, nor can any collection, when our material is so polymorphous, amoeba-like in its capacity to embrace themes and motifs from every direction, quicksilver in its ability to penetrate into the unlikeliest of corners, cultural and geographic and, not least, linguistic. Nonetheless, this is the most wide-ranging assemblage to date of material connected to our topic, and it studies that material in greater depth than any previous work.

The character of our story has encouraged a roughly chronological organisation of this book. Following an introduction to the world of Hellenistic Jewry, we study the *Letter of Aristeas* and how the legend contained in it was taken up in the Greek writings of Jews in the Near East in succeeding centuries. As early as this, we see the number of the translators, originally seventy-two, being referred to sometimes in the rounder and more convenient form of seventy; this, in its Greek form, has given us the name by which the translation of the whole Old Testament has become known, the Septuagint. Around the end of the first century C.E., the Rabbis transformed the story, introducing a miracle into what had been a straightforward account of a translation, and giving the story the element essential to its significance for Jews and, still more, for Christians, over two thousand years. The nature of that miracle and of the alleged textual changes in the biblical text associated with it provide the subject of Chapters 3 and 4. At an early stage, the legend, complete with miracle, was taken up by Christian writers, who introduce many new details, adapting the story to Christian needs and even using it in anti-Jewish polemic. In Chapter 5 we examine these changes and their connections with the attitude of the early church to the Greek version of the Bible in Latin and Greek writers.

The rise of Islam brought massive linguistic change to the Near East. The Greek Bible gradually lost its centrality for Christians there, whereas Muslims were never very interested in it. As a result, we find new attitudes to the Greek translation and the legend begins to atomise into its constituent narrative elements and to be used for different polemical and historiographical ends. These

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are examined in Chapters 6 and 7. In Chapters 8 and 9 we return to the Jews and look first at the version of the story in Yosippon, a medieval Hebrew historical text with an extremely complicated tradition and widespread influence on other writings, and secondly at texts by Karaites, Samaritans and Rabbanite Jews from all over the Mediterranean basin. Finally, with the Renaissance, we enter upon a new age, when the *Letter of Aristeas* and the legend became the subject of modern scholarly study, among both Jews and Christians. Between the Renaissance and the end of the twentieth century, debate has concentrated on the authenticity of the *Letter* itself and its contents and, just as importantly, on the character of the Greek version whose birth it relates. Among Roman Catholics, the realization that the *Letter* is not authentic has created problems for those who retain belief in the divine inspiration of the Greek version of the Bible. In Chapter 10, we follow the debate from the earliest translations of the *Letter* in the fifteenth century to the most recent discussions of inspiration at the end of the twentieth.

The central thesis of this book is that the most powerful argument used by the Christian Church in favour of the inspiration of the Greek Bible is based on a story fashioned in the workshop of rabbinic *aggada*, interpretation of the Bible, homiletics. That story – the legend of changes introduced by the Jewish translators of the Septuagint into Greek – was invented by the Rabbis around the turn of the first century of the Common Era. Within another century or so, it provided Christian writers with “proof” for the inspiration of their text(s) of the Greek Bible, and possibly also fed the claim that Jews had tampered with the words of scripture in order to hide prophecies of the coming of the messiah.

The legend itself was not born in a vacuum. It grew out of an atmosphere that had been prepared for it in the cultural world of Hellenistic Judaism. In that world, the reception of Judaism was helped by the claim that the Bible had been available in Greek and that Greeks had been acquainted with the biblical text long before the time of the Septuagint translation. In this claim really begins the process that leads to the integration of an oriental cult into the intellectual community of the West. This was to be of universal importance, for it is this process that made possible the Christian civilisation of Europe. This civilisation could now be both Hebrew and Hellenic. Hence the epigraph of this book, borrowed from the second-century Platonist and Pythagorean Numenius, “What is Plato but Moses speaking in Attic?”

“Habent sua fata libelli”: my father had thought to use this phrase in the body of this book about the history of the book of books. It seems most appropriate to place it here, at the head of an account of the genesis of this work. My father died on 20 July 1995.<sup>1</sup> In the last part of his life, he had been

<sup>1</sup> For an account of his life and work see D. Wasserstein 1996.

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working on various problems associated with the relations between Greek and Jew, between the hellenistic world and that of ancient Judaism. One of the topics that most engaged his attention was the legend contained in the *Letter of Aristeas* concerning the translation of the Septuagint and the literary posterity of that legend. He had been interested in the Septuagint and in the legend for decades. He had discussed this with me and with others on numerous occasions, especially in the last five years of his life. After his death, I went through his papers and found, *inter multa alia*, his materials for a book on this topic.

At the start I saw my job as essentially that of an editor. To that end, I tidied up the notes, eliminated repetitions, provided where necessary linking text and organised the whole in the shape toward which I knew my father to be working. Where my father gave extensive quotations in Greek or in other languages, I have generally provided English translations, except where the original language of the passage in question was necessary to the argument.

As I continued, however, I discovered that my task was more complex than simply editing a more or less complete manuscript, for two main reasons. The first was that my father had collected a vast amount of materials; he had assembled and to some degree organised and sifted these. He had also written a long introduction, parts of Chapters 1 and 2 and the principal part of Chapter 3, though the material was incomplete and unrevised. As to the rest, though part of the materials existed, the chapters were not written at all. My task, therefore, involved not merely editing but also writing extensive sections of this book. I hope that I have been able to do justice to my father's views, especially on the matters discussed in the latter parts of the book.

This is in a great degree, then, a joint production. In most cases, it is clear from the context and from what has been said above who is speaking at any point. For the rest, I take responsibility for the final appearance and shape of the work.

The second reason for my greater difficulty as I proceeded was a curious illustration of the fact that subjects that have languished unexplored for many years occasionally burst into life with the publication of a number of studies more or less simultaneously: two other works on topics connected with the Aristeas story appeared after my father became ill. Each overlaps, though differently, with this book. Giuseppe Veltri's *Eine Tora für den König Talmai* (1994) argues, as its title indicates, that there is a real link between the Septuagint and Ptolemy II and, consequently, that the *Letter of Aristeas* should be seen as an authentic historical source. There is much of importance in this valuable book, but the basic standpoint and the central concern of Veltri's book differ greatly from those of this study. However, Veltri's book contains extensive collection, study and analysis of the lists of changes that the translators are alleged to have introduced into the biblical text for Ptolemy II; consequently, the detailed study of these that my father has envisaged does not appear here.

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More recently, as I began work on this project, Luciano Canfora published *Il Viaggio di Aristea* (1996), which I reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement* (6 June 1997). Canfora looks at a superficially similar topic, but ignores completely the later Jewish element (largely in Hebrew and Aramaic) in the story, which my father saw as central. Canfora, moreover, pays limited attention to what I have called here the oriental aspect of the story; partly in consequence of this, its interpretation of certain important aspects differs from ours.<sup>2</sup>

These two works, because of the ways in which they overlap with each other and with the subject of this book, in fact offered me encouragement in my pursuit of this enterprise, for they showed me that we still lacked an integrated synthesis of the topic in all its aspects. Neither the Jewish nor the Christian dimensions of the subject could be properly studied in isolation; a study that simply put the two side by side would ignore the influence that the one had had upon the other strand of this tradition. My father, as a Hellenist, always took the view that one must have a thorough command of a field to produce useful scholarship in it;<sup>3</sup> and he also took the view that in the Hellenistic environment of many of the texts studied here the field in question included far more than merely Greek or merely Jewish sources. Each element in this enormously rich and complex set of cultures needed to be studied and understood if we were to be able to deepen our understanding of the problems that it presented. This is the first study of the subject that attempts to look thoroughly at all the sources known from all the relevant cultures, including those in oriental languages, in their mutual relationship.

A word on transliteration and translations: in transliteration from oriental languages we have sought to follow a commonsensical middle path between scientific exactitude and outright error, without being a slave to some artificial consistency. We have omitted all diacritical marks.

As to translation, generally we have used standard modern versions (except for the Bible, where I follow my father in preferring for the most part that of King James, in its Revised version, both for scholarly and for aesthetic reasons). In general, we have not provided texts in the original languages, but we have preferred to give English renderings. However, it should be stressed that, especially in respect of rabbinic texts, my English versions pretend to offer no more than an approximation of the original, for the guidance of those without direct access to those languages. As parts of the argument in this book turn on the

<sup>2</sup> A third work, MacLeod 2001, is a collection that looks at aspects of the Library and intellectual subjects connected with it, but it addresses the questions studied here only in passing. See also the Conclusion.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the views of Wolf and Scaliger, in Pfeiffer 1976:118.

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exact meaning or meanings that individual expressions may bear, this should be borne in mind.

My father worked on this book over many years. He built up debts to many individuals and institutions along the way. A stay at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, in 1985–86, and another at the Annenberg Institute in Philadelphia in 1988–89 were devoted largely to work on this and related topics. He delivered a lecture in memory of Professor I. Seeligmann in Jerusalem on this subject and the Simon Rawidowicz Memorial Lecture at Brandeis University in Boston in 1989, and he spoke on a similar topic at the meeting of the European Association for Jewish Studies in Berlin in 1987. I spoke at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Jerusalem in 1996, at a meeting of the working group on Acculturation in the Greco–Roman World, and am grateful to the participants in that meeting both for their comments and for their encouragement. I also spoke at a conference in the same institute in 2001, organised by the working group on the subject From Hellenistic Judaism to Christian Hellenism, on The Tradition of the Seventy: From the *Letter of Aristeas* to Epiphanius; once again, I am grateful to the participants in that meeting for their advice. A fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin in 1999–2000 and another at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2002–03 (as one of the leaders of the research group Greeks, Romans, Jews and Others in the Near East from Alexander to Muhammad: “A Civilization of Epigraphy”) made it possible for me to devote the concentrated energy that was necessary to the completion of this work. A special word of thanks goes to the staffs of these two institutions and to the librarians in all the institutions where the work on this book was carried out in three continents over these many years.

Two articles by my father that appeared only after his death, which were in effect taken out of this book, have been partially re-integrated in this work. They are ‘The Number and Provenance of Jews in Graeco–Roman Antiquity: A Note on Population Statistics’, *Classical Studies in Honor of David Sohlberg*, edited by Ranon Katzoff with Yaakov Petroff and David Schaps, Ramat Gan, Bar-Ilan University Press, 1996, pp. 307–17; and ‘On Donkeys, Wine and the Uses of Textual Criticism: Septuagintal Variants in Jewish Palestine’, *The Jews in the Hellenistic-Roman World: Studies in Memory of Menahem Stern*, edited by Isaiah Gafni, Aharon Oppenheimer and Daniel Schwartz, Jerusalem, Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History and the Historical Society of Israel, 1996, pp. 119\*–42\*. I thank the editors and publishers of the volumes in which they appeared for their permission to reprint parts of these articles in revised form.

Many people have been helpful in bringing this project to completion. Our thanks go in particular to C. Adang, W. Adler, I. Basal, the late J. A. Black,

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Jerusalem  
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## Abbreviations

AdRN	Abot de-Rabbi Nathan
AdRNB	Abot de-Rabbi Nathan B (ed. Schechter)
ANET	J. B. Pritchard (ed.), <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament</i> , Princeton, 1950
BR	Bereshit Rabba
BT	Babylonian Talmud
CAH	<i>Cambridge Ancient History</i>
CHI	<i>Cambridge History of Iran</i>
CHJ	<i>Cambridge History of Judaism</i>
CIJ	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum</i>
CPJ	<i>Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum</i>
DNB	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
EI	<i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i>
EJ	<i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i> (Jerusalem)
JE	<i>Jewish Encyclopedia</i>
LSJ	H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , 9th edition, Oxford, 1940; <i>Supplement</i> , ed. E. A. Barber, Oxford, 1968
LXX	Septuagint
MS	Massekhet Sopherim
MST	Massekhet Sepher Torah
NT	New Testament
OCD	<i>Oxford Classical Dictionary</i>
OT	Old Testament
PG	Patrologia Graeca
PL	Patrologia Latina
PT	Palestinian Talmud
RE	A. Pauly, G. Wissowa, W. Kroll, <i>Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> , Stuttgart 1893–

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*Abbreviations*

*SIG*

W. Dittenberger, *Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum* 3rd edition,  
1915–24

*TAPA*

*Transactions of the American Philosophical Association*

§

sections in Wendland's 1900 edition and all subsequent editions  
and translations of the *Letter of Aristeas*