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978-0-521-28551-3 - Jews in the Hellenistic World: Josephus, Aristeas, The Sibylline Oracles, Eupolemus

John R. Bartlett

Excerpt

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Jews in the hellenistic world

In recent years, an increasing amount of scholarly time and attention has been devoted to the literature written in Greek by the Jews of the hellenistic age. Interest in this literature is hardly surprising in an intellectual tradition founded on the Graeco-Roman classics and the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. Most scholars, however, have been content to focus on the more classical writings or on the Hebrew scriptures; the hellenistic literature, whether from the Greek or the Jewish world, has been of more limited interest. But in the last century there has been new emphasis on the importance of the links in the hellenistic period between the Greek world and the Jewish world.

The history of Greek contact with the Levant is a long one. As early as the fifteenth century BC Mycenaean pottery was beginning to reach Late Bronze-Age sites on both sides of the Jordan. In the tenth century BC King David apparently employed mercenaries from Crete (Kerethites: 2 Sam. 8: 18) in his army; in the late seventh century BC Greek mercenaries fought in Palestine in the pay of the Egyptian Pharaohs. In the fifth and fourth centuries Persian rule reached west from Susa to the shores of the Aegean and Mediterranean seas, where it clashed with the maritime interests of the Athenians and other Greeks. In 490 and 481 BC the Persians invaded Greece and were driven back; in 401–400 the Persian Cyrus marched eastwards through what is now Turkey with Greek mercenaries in rebellion against his brother, the Persian king Artaxerxes II; and in 331 Alexander the Great marched his Macedonian troops through Samaria and the borders of Judah to Egypt, before turning east to Mesopotamia and India. All these movements and many others brought the Greeks into contact with the Jews and other peoples of the Levant, but it is generally agreed that it was in the aftermath of Alexander's conquests that the Jewish people began to be closely involved with the hellenistic world and to look west rather than east.

The process of hellenisation was not a simple one. The Persian province of Yehud or Judah became hellenised by degrees as it became subject to the administration and bureaucracy of the Ptolemies, the Greek dynasty that seized power in Egypt after the death of Alexander.

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The book of Ecclesiastes (5: 8f; 10: 20) may hint at the political situation in Judah in this period:

‘If you witness in some province the oppression of the poor and the denial of right and justice, do not be surprised at what goes on, for every official has a higher one set over him, and the highest keeps watch over them all. The best thing for a country is a king whose own lands are well tilled. Do not speak ill of the king in your ease, or of a rich man in your bedroom; for a bird may carry your voice, and a winged messenger may repeat what you say.’

The correspondence of Zenon, who toured Palestine and Transjordan in 259 BC as the administrator of the Egyptian finance minister Apollonius, shows that Greek was used officially for purposes of provincial administration. Particularly interesting is the record of Zenon's purchase in Transjordan of a slave-girl, which reveals the presence there of soldiers and others with Greek names from various parts of the Mediterranean world: ‘In the reign of Ptolemy [II Philadelphus]... at Birta of Ammanitis, Nicanor son of Xenocles, Cnidian, in the service of Toubias, sold to Zenon son of Agreophon, Caunian, in the service of Apollonius the chief minister, a Sidonian girl named Sphragis, aged about seven, for fifty drachmas.’ The guarantors and witnesses included a Persian and a Macedonian from Toubias' personal troops, and four government officials, one from Athens and three from hellenistic cities of the Turkish coast (Miletus and Colophon in Ionia, and Aspendus in Pamphylia; see Map 1). The seller and buyer respectively came from Cnidus and Caunus in south-west Turkey. One should note also that the land of the Old Testament Ammonites is now named in Greek fashion Ammanitis; similarly Moab had become Moabitis and Gilead Galaaditis.

The growing importance of the Greek language, culture and institutions in Judah through the third, second, and first centuries BC is well documented. Even Judas Maccabaeus' diplomat had a Greek name, Eupolemus (see below, pp. 56–9). The Hasmonaean kings used both Greek and Hebrew titles on their coins, and the Nabataean king Aretas III (c. 85–62 BC) could style himself ‘Phil-hellene’ on the coins he issued from Damascus. Greek manuscripts of the scriptures have been found at Qumran; Herod the Great employed a hellenised Syrian, Nicolaus of Damascus, as his secretary and court historian. The city of Samaria was called Sebaste, the Greek equivalent of the Latin Augusta, after the Emperor Augustus. Greek was one of the three languages used on the title affixed to the cross of Jesus, and it is not

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impossible that Jesus like other Galilaeans understood at least some Greek. Places like Samaria, Caesarea, Marisa, Tiberias, Paneas, and Philadelphia (see Map 5) were hellenised towns; Jesus visited the Decapolis (Mark 7: 31), the group of ten cities in northern Transjordan, and one of these, Gadara south-east of the Sea of Galilee, was the home of such well-known Greek writers as Menippus the Cynic (third century BC) and Meleager the epigrammatist and anthologist (c. 60 BC), whose couplet saying 'Greetings!' in three languages illustrates the present point:

If you are a Syrian, 'Salaam!'; if a Phoenician, 'Naidios!';

If you are a Greek, 'Chairē!'; and say the same in return.

(*Anthologia Graeca* VII.419)

However, while Judah was under the administration of Egyptian officials who spoke and wrote Greek, Jews from Judah were settling elsewhere. There had been Jews in Egypt already for several hundred years; Jer. 41: 16–44: 30 tells of Jewish emigration to Egypt after Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC, and papyri found on the island of Elephantinē near Assuan at the end of the last century revealed the presence there from the early sixth century BC to the end of the fifth century of a Jewish garrison settlement. In 312 BC Ptolemy I settled captive Jews in Egypt (Letter of Aristeas 10–12; see p. 19). 2 Maccabees is an abbreviated version of a work written in Greek by Jason, a Jew from Cyrene in North Africa, and 2 Maccabees was prefaced at an early stage of its history by two letters written in the second century BC to Jews in Egypt by the Jerusalem authorities, urging them to keep the feast of the reconsecration of the Temple. By the time of Philo in the first century AD it is said that there were a million Jews in Alexandria (*In Flaccum* VI.43), and their claims to Alexandrian citizenship led to riots and the sending of delegations from both sides to the emperor himself in AD 38 (see pp. 182–8). But there were also large numbers of Jews settled elsewhere; Josephus refers to Jews transported by Antiochus III to Phrygia from Babylonia (*Ant.* XII.3.4 (147–53)). 1 Macc. 15: 22ff suggests that Jews might have been found in the mid second century BC at Delos, Myndos, Sicyon, Caria, Samos, Pamphylia, Lycia, Halicarnassus, Rhodes, Phaselis, Cos, Sidē, Aradus, Gortyna, Cnidus, Cyprus, and Cyrene (see Maps 1 and 4), as well perhaps as Sparta and Rome, to which the Maccabaeans sent embassies (1 Macc. 8: 17–32; 12: 1–23). By 59 BC the Roman lawyer Cicero was complaining that the jury was being unduly influenced by the large numbers of Jews in court. In AD 44 the Emperor Claudius had a number

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of Jews expelled from Rome (Acts 18: 2). The writings and travels of Paul of Tarsus witness to the presence of Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean world in the mid first century AD.

It is thus not surprising that from the third century BC onwards there were Jews who found it natural to write in Greek. There were many reasons why a Jew might write in Greek. The author might be a hellenised member of the Jerusalem aristocracy parading his learning, or a diplomat engaged in his profession, a travelling business-man, an Alexandrian scholar using his native or adopted Greek, a tradesman in a Greek city presenting his accounts, and so on. A writer might be addressing fellow diaspora Jews, or Greek Gentiles who knew no Hebrew or Aramaic. It is not always clear whether a piece of Jewish apologetic written in Greek was primarily intended to persuade gentile unbelievers of the merits of Judaism or to boost the morale of Jews living in a gentile society. Educated Jews, anxious to be accepted as members of the aristocracy of the hellenistic world, might become acquainted with the Greek classics, but there is little or no evidence that the educated Greek had very much concern to read the Jewish scriptures. Jewish apologetic works in Greek were probably read primarily and largely by Jewish readers, just as today works of Christian apologetic are read more by the believer than by the unbeliever.

The Jewish hellenistic literature that remains to us is mostly of this nature. It owes its preservation, however, mainly to Christian writers. The writings of Philo of Alexandria became of greater interest to Christian theologians than to Jewish; the first known important writer to make use of Josephus was Eusebius, the early fourth-century Bishop of Caesarea, closely followed by the fourth-century biblical scholar Jerome. The Sibylline Oracles of Jewish origin were preserved by being taken over and developed by the Christian Church from the second century onwards. The writings and even the names of most minor Jewish hellenistic writers are known to us chiefly and sometimes solely from references in Josephus' works and from a series of fragments collected by Alexander Polyhistor in the first century BC and preserved by Eusebius in his *Praeparatio evangelica* in the fourth century AD. Perhaps the most important monument of Jewish hellenistic literature is the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament begun at Alexandria in the third century BC. This too owed its continued existence after the first century AD to the Christian Church, which adopted this Greek version of the scriptures as its own. In addition to translations of earlier Hebrew writings, the Septuagint includes a number of writings from the second or first century BC, such as the

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Wisdom of Solomon and the Greek translations of Ecclesiasticus, Daniel, and Esther, all of which qualify as Jewish hellenistic literature.

The main part of this book is devoted to passages selected from the Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates, the Sibylline Oracles, and from the writings of Eupolemus and Josephus. The first two works derive from Alexandria; Eupolemus and Josephus, however, were both of Jewish priestly families connected with Jerusalem. Eupolemus visited Rome in 161 BC as a diplomat, and Josephus lived in Rome and wrote his books there from the end of the Jewish War until the end of the first century AD. Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Rome were important centres of Jewish life and activity, though not, as we have seen, the only ones. Alexandria was particularly important as a place of learning and literature, and it is hardly accidental that more hellenistic Jewish literature can be located here than anywhere else. In addition to the translation of the Septuagint, the Sibylline Oracles and the Letter of Aristeas, we can perhaps credit to Alexandria the writings of the chronographer Demetrius (late third century BC), Aristobulus the philosopher (perhaps mentioned in 2 Macc. 1: 10), the historian Artapanus (late third to mid second century BC), the playwright Ezekiel (mid second century BC), and possibly Pseudo-Hecataeus and Aristeas (second century BC). The grandson of Jesus son of Sirach settled in Egypt – probably in Alexandria – and translated his grandfather's work there in the reign of Ptolemy VIII, Euergetes II (145–116 BC). The Greek translation of the book of Esther was brought to Egypt – again, probably to Alexandria – in 78–77 BC by Dositheus (Rest of Esth. 11: 1). The Wisdom of Solomon was almost certainly written at Alexandria in the second half of the first century BC or the early first century AD. The romance of Joseph and Aseneth and the book 3 Maccabees both derive from Egypt in the late first century BC, when relationships between Jews and Greek citizens of Alexandria had deteriorated. The hostility shown in 3 Maccabees towards hellenism, the king, and those Jews ready to acknowledge the cult of Greek gods for the sake of Alexandrian citizenship has suggested to some that this work comes from the less hellenised lower-class Jews from the countryside (the *chōra*) rather than from the city of Alexandria itself.

Other Jewish hellenistic writings are harder to locate with certainty. Pseudo-Eupolemus (mid second century BC), Cleodemus Malchus (second to first century BC), Theophilus (before mid first century BC), and Thallus (first century AD), together with the late second-century BC epic poet Theodotus have all been connected with Samaria and taken to be Samaritan authors. The most likely of these to be Samaritan is Pseudo-Eupolemus, who appears to emphasise the importance of the

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Samaritan holy place on Mount Gerizim near Shechem (destroyed later in the second century BC by John Hyrcanus) at the expense of Jerusalem. It is hardly surprising to find material from this century reflecting the relationships between the Jews and the people of Samaria and Shechem (cp. *Ecclus.* 50: 26; 'the senseless folk that live at Shechem'), but there is nothing in Cleodemus Malchus, Theophilus, and Thallus that compels us to identify them as Samaritans, and the case for Theodotus as a Samaritan writer has recently been overturned. Theodotus reflects rather an anti-Samaritan view that justifies Hyrcanus' attack on Shechem.

It is likely that some of this literature comes from Jerusalem itself. We know from *2 Macc.* 4: 14f that the priests there were not slow to adopt hellenistic ways, and we have extant five fragments of the work of Eupolemus, who came from a priestly family and wrote in Greek. Two Greek letters from Jerusalem to the Jews in Egypt are preserved at the beginning of *2 Maccabees*. A certain Philo the Elder wrote a poem in Greek hexameters entitled 'On Jerusalem' (if the title given by Polyhistor is to be trusted; the poem itself includes much else), and Philo himself may have been a native of Jerusalem or Judaea. We are on firmer ground with the colophon of the Greek book of *Esther* (*Rest of Esth.* 11: 1), which tells us clearly that the original authentic book had been translated 'by Lysimachus son of Ptolemaeus, a resident in Jerusalem' and had been brought – presumably to Alexandria – in the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra (i.e., probably 78–77 BC). In view of all this, it is not impossible that there were at least some Jerusalem priests involved in the translation of the Septuagint at Alexandria (the *Letter of Aristeas* says that the whole team of translators came from Jerusalem); but on the other hand, the Jerusalem priesthood was probably less hellenised in the third century BC (to judge from *2 Maccabees*) than in the later-second and first centuries. Even in the second century they may have preferred to write in Hebrew or Aramaic rather than Greek; Jesus son of Sirach (c. 180 BC) wrote his book in Hebrew, and the *Book of Daniel* is written (for whatever reason) in a combination of Hebrew and Aramaic. *1 Maccabees* was originally written in Hebrew, and later translated into Greek – probably before Josephus used the book. The annals of the high-priesthood of John Hyrcanus (*1 Macc.* 16: 24) were probably written in Hebrew or Aramaic. Josephus himself says that he wrote the first version of his *Jewish War* in Aramaic for readers in the east, later turning it into Greek for readers in the west (see p. 96).

Little is known of Jewish hellenistic writings from other places.

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2 Maccabees describes itself (2 Macc. 2: 19ff) as the abridged version of a five-volume work by Jason of Cyrene, though whether Jason wrote in Cyrene or Alexandria or Jerusalem is hard to say; we know from Mark 15: 21 of another Cyrenean who found his way to Jerusalem. Perhaps Alexandria is the most likely place, both for the original work and for the abridgement; it was presumably at Alexandria that it acquired the two letters addressed to Egypt that now preface the work. Doubtless hellenistic Jews in other cities wrote letters and other works in Greek; Paul of Tarsus, for example, wrote to and from places like Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, Galatia, Philippi, Colossae, and Laodicea (see Map 1). But it seems to have been Christian rather than Jewish writings that have survived from these places, and, as we have seen, even the Alexandrian Jewish literature was preserved by Christian rather than by Jewish agency.

The main interests of these hellenistic Jewish writers are clear. Inevitably their work revolves round the interpretation of Jewish history, for which their major source was usually the Septuagint. Jews were not the only people concerned to present their history in Greek. In the third century BC an Egyptian priest called Manetho wrote in Greek his *Aegyptiaca* chronicling Egyptian history down to the time of Alexander the Great. In Babylon, Manetho's contemporary Berossus, a priest of Bel, used the priestly chronicles to write a Greek history of Babylon. One of the earliest hellenistic Jewish writers was Demetrius (late third century BC), whose main concern was to present a chronology of Jewish history from patriarchal to monarchic times. A similar concern for chronology can be seen in Eupolemus and Thallus. A fragment of Eupolemus notes that there were 5149 years between Adam and his own day (which he gives as the fifth year of Demetrius I Sôtēr and the twelfth year of Ptolemy VIII of Egypt, i.e., probably 158–157 BC), and 2580 years between the Exodus and the same date. If the Jews were compelled to admit that the Egyptian civilisation was older than their own, they could counter by tracing their physical descent back beyond the beginnings of Egyptian history. A related interest lies in showing that Israel's ancestors were men of learning; Pseudo-Eupolemus asserts that Abraham discovered both astrology and Chaldaean science, and taught the motions of the sun and moon to the Phoenicians and astrology to the Egyptians. Pseudo-Eupolemus adds that this knowledge was first acquired by Enoch, whom he identifies with the Greek Atlas. Artapanus also notes that Abraham taught astrology to the Egyptians; he portrays Joseph as the founder of the Egyptian system of land allotment, and presents Moses as a successful

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general, crediting him with the invention of ships, cranes, Egyptian weapons, machines for drawing water, and philosophy. Moses is thus shown to be the perfect hellenistic man. Eupolemus similarly portrays Moses as the first wise man, the originator of the alphabet, and the first lawgiver. Josephus in his *Antiquities* follows the same tradition (see pp. 149–50). The theme can be traced back to the Old Testament itself, which presents Joseph (Gen. 41: 39) and Moses (Exod. 7: 11f) as superior to the wise men and magicians of Egypt.

Naturally the Law was important. The Letter of Aristeas is especially concerned to defend the authority of the Greek translation of the Law of Moses. According to Josephus, Pseudo-Hecataeus ‘demonstrates our respect for the laws, and how we choose to suffer to the end rather than transgress them, and think this a fine thing’ (*Apion* 1.22 (190)). 3 Maccabees illustrates this theme with a vivid story of how Ptolemy IV incited intoxicated elephants to trample on Jews who had refused to apostatise (the Jews were saved when the elephants turned on Ptolemy). According to the Letter of Aristeas (see p. 15), the Law is a fence to preserve the Jews from having too much contact with the impurities and vanities of the Gentiles. The priesthood is given less emphasis than the Law in this literature – probably because the priesthood was less well known outside Jerusalem – though Pseudo-Hecataeus and the Letter of Aristeas speak highly of the intellectual, business, and administrative capacities of the high priest. More attention is given to the Jerusalem Temple, an important focal symbol of Judaism. Pseudo-Hecataeus and the Letter of Aristeas describe it, and Eupolemus devotes much space to his account of David’s preparation and Solomon’s building of the Temple, underlining the friendly assistance given by the rulers of Syria and Egypt.

The importance of the Temple and the fame of David and Solomon naturally led to an interest in the city of Jerusalem itself; hence Philo the Elder’s poem (see above, p. 6), of which Eusebius has preserved twenty-four rather obscure lines. Pseudo-Hecataeus and the Letter of Aristeas (see pp. 24f) both describe Jerusalem, though their descriptions may owe more to convention than to first-hand knowledge. Josephus’ description is more likely to be accurate, and has been verified in many particulars by recent archaeological work in Jerusalem.

Whether these writings were mainly intended for Jewish or gentile reading, there is no doubt that the authors were at all times conscious of the position of the Jews in a gentile world. It was important to demonstrate to fellow Jews and perhaps to outsiders that the Jews were an ancient people, with wisdom, learning, literature, history,

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achievements, and godliness of their own. It was important to show that Jews could play a responsible part in the political and military affairs of whatever country they had made their home, while making their own distinctive contribution to it. Thus a Jewish soldier campaigning for his hellenistic ruler demonstrated the futility of taking auspices from a bird by shooting the bird, with the remark that if the bird had possessed divinatory powers it would not have allowed itself to be shot (*Apion* 1.22 (200–4)). And it was sometimes important to underline that there were occasions when a Jew had to face persecution or persuade the authorities that the Jews were loyal citizens in spite of false accusations to the contrary. It was particularly important to a man like Josephus to demonstrate to the Romans that the Jews were not all such awkward trouble-makers as the rebellion suggested, and to his fellow Jews that the Romans were not such brutal tyrants as their destruction of Jerusalem seemed to demonstrate. On another level, it was important to deal with the difficulties that arose when a Jewish boy fell in love with a gentile girl; in the romance of Joseph and Aseneth (late first century BC), Aseneth willingly embraces the Jewish faith, and, once the gentile villain has died of injuries received trying to abduct the heroine, all is well.

On the level of theology, there were a number of issues important to the Jewish hellenistic writers. In their polytheistic world they needed to underline for their Jewish readers the first two commandments, ‘You shall have no other gods to set against me’, and, ‘You shall not make a carved image for yourself.’ Stress on the second commandment was perhaps made necessary by the ever-present temptation to accommodate one’s Jewish beliefs to the religion of the hellenistic city-state, with its temple and cult-statue of the presiding deity. Egyptian religion, with its animal-headed deities and native priesthood, was probably less subtly tempting, and it drew Jewish scorn rather than argument. Scathing attacks on idolatry are prominent in Jewish hellenistic works from Egypt such as the Sibylline Oracles or the Wisdom of Solomon. Stress on the first commandment, with its corollary that ‘God, the creator of all, is one’ (*Jos. Ant.* 1.7.1 (155); see p. 145), was a reaction to the general acceptance throughout the Graeco-Roman world of the Olympian gods. It is hardly surprising to find that Greek gods or heroes were subordinated to the Jewish God by being linked with the antediluvian or patriarchal ancestors of Israel; thus Heracles joins with Abraham’s sons in a campaign against the Libyans and marries one of Abraham’s grand-daughters (Cleodemus Malchus in Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 1X.20.4), and Atlas is identified with Enoch (Pseudo-

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Eupolemus in Eusebius, *P.E.* ix.17.9). According to Artapanus, Orpheus, the founder of the Greek religious movement known to us as Orphism, was taught by Moses, and it was Moses also who assigned to the Egyptians their native gods (Eusebius, *P.E.* ix.27.4). The gods many and lords many of the hellenistic and Egyptian worlds are thus firmly put in their place. The Greeks responded with the charge that the Jews were *atheoi* and *asebeis* – godless and impious – to which the Jewish hellenistic writers replied by presenting the Jewish patriarch Abraham both as the first theologian to teach monotheism and as a model of piety (see p. 145). The Letter of Aristeas takes a different line; in the Letter, Aristeas makes the point to Ptolemy that

‘...the same God who gave the Jews their Law is the one who directs your kingdom...for the God who watches over and creates all things is the God whom they worship, the God whom all men worship, the God whom we ourselves worship, your Royal Highness, except that we address him by other names such as Zeus and Dis.’

(Cp. p. 14, and Josephus, *Apion* ii.19 (179–81), p. 87.) It was important to show that Judaism could match the rationalism of the Greek philosophers. Josephus shows Abraham as a rational theologian and apologist; Philo actually calls him a philosopher. Josephus himself attacked the doctrines of the Epicurean philosophers (see p. 170) and supported those of the Stoics (see p. 81), and apparently intended to write a treatise ‘About God and his being, and about the laws’ (see pp. 88f). Of course, he judges Greek philosophy in the light of the philosophy of Abraham and Moses, and so he sees Plato, the greatest of the Greek philosophers, as in certain matters following Moses (*Apion* ii.36 (257)). He tells a story from Clearchus to make the point that Plato’s famous pupil Aristotle respected the Jews as philosophers (see pp. 179f). Not all Josephus’ apologetic was on this high philosophical plane, however, and in the *Apion* he gives much space to rebutting less intellectual views of Judaism (see below, pp. 86f).

These and other concerns of the Jewish hellenistic writers will be illustrated through the following selections from the Letter of Aristeas, the Sibylline Oracles, Eupolemus, and the writings of Josephus.