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978-1-107-00163-3 - The Jewish–Greek Tradition in Antiquity and the Byzantine Empire

Edited by James K. Aitken and James Carleton Paget

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction**James K. Aitken and James Carleton Paget*

The term Jewish–Greek ‘tradition’ recognizes the continuity of a Greek-speaking Jewish world and a Greek literary engagement among Jews. It begins in antiquity, as early as the third century BCE with the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek (the Septuagint), and continues up to the period of the Byzantine Empire, where traces remain of Jewish scholarly activity in Greek and use of Greek versions of the Bible. It could be said to represent a distinctive strand within Judaism, and one that reflects a European contribution to Jewish studies, seen both in the fact that the object of study is largely Jews in or in contact with Europe, and also in the fact that it is modern European scholars who have largely contributed to the subject.¹ Although this volume only covers the period up to the end of Byzantine Empire, the theme could be said to have an ongoing importance and significance afterwards among Jewish communities in Greece, even if these were largely destroyed during the Second World War.

In an academic career which has embraced a striking range of subjects within the field of Jewish studies, Nicholas de Lange has devoted much of his energy to what, for want of a better description, we might call Judaism and Hellenism, or Judaism and Greek culture, as described above. His work in this area has encompassed the ancient period, beginning with his doctoral dissertation on Origen and the Jews, published in 1976, and followed by contributions on the apocryphal books of the Bible, the Septuagint and the Greek versions. Perhaps distinctively, Nicholas has sought through a variety of publications and through the successful acquisitions of funds for two large international projects, to advance the study of Byzantine Jewry. In so doing he has built upon and extended the work of such distinguished predecessors as D. S. Blondheim, Joshua Starr and

¹ See de Lange’s discussion of the European dimension of Judaeo-Greek studies (de Lange 1999–2000a).

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Samuel Krauss, seeking to show the scholarly world why this is a fecund and significant field, which has been undeservedly neglected.

The conviction that Byzantine Judaism has not received proper attention appears in a variety of places in Nicholas's work, notably in the Foreword to the first number in 1987 of the *Bulletin of Judaeo-Greek Studies*, which Nicholas himself founded and continues to edit, and which has, through book lists, reviews and short essays, greatly advanced our understanding of Judaeo-Greek studies from the ancient to the modern period. Here Nicholas begins with a clear statement: 'This Bulletin has its origins in the sense of loneliness and isolation felt by a number of scholars working the neglected field of Judaeo-Greek, and, more particularly, Judaeo-Byzantine, studies',² and he continues by noting how, relative to the other areas of Jewish-medieval studies, this one has been sadly under-represented. A similar concern can be found as a leitmotiv in many other places in Nicholas's writings.

In part this interest in Byzantine Judaism arises from an attempt to combat a prejudice, held by Jewish and Christian scholars alike, which assumes that after about 100 CE, Jewish–Greek culture broadly disappeared and that by the end of the second century, possibly a little later, the majority of Jews had begun to revert to a Hebraic culture, a phenomenon that first manifested itself in the publication of the Mishnah. Although de Lange is clear that there were signs of a Hebrew revival as early as Bar Kokhbah, an interest in Greek and a concern with Greek culture continued, in his opinion, well beyond the second century.³ There are indications of this important thesis as early as his work on Origen and the Jews.⁴ Here Nicholas is keen to highlight proof of rabbinic knowledge of Greek, already emphasized by Samuel Krauss,⁵ as well as evidence, hinted at in the character of the Jew, whom Origen quotes in his *Contra Celsum*, of what de Lange termed 'another Judaism', which took a strong interest in Greek classical culture and which expressed itself in the Greek language.

Hints contained in this early work at ongoing interest in Greek culture beyond the second century CE, become considerably more than that in de Lange's later work. In this he has concentrated much of his energy on exploring evidence to support knowledge of Greek versions of the Bible, especially in the Byzantine period. Keen to contradict the view that the Christian church's adoption of the Septuagint as its Bible led to a Jewish abandonment of that text and versions in Greek more generally, de Lange,

² *BJGS* 1 (Autumn 1987), 1 (edited by Nicholas de Lange and Judith Humphrey).

³ See de Lange 1996b. ⁴ De Lange 1976. ⁵ Krauss 1898–9.

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following the work of D. S. Blondheim and N. Fernández Marcos,⁶ has uncovered evidence, much of it from the Cairo Genizah, to show that ‘Greek-speaking Jews throughout the Middle Ages made use of translations of the biblical books from Hebrew into Greek’.⁷ Significantly, in contrast to the use of new vernacular translations elsewhere in the medieval Jewish world, the evidence in Byzantium is remarkable since it indicates the ‘presence of a continuous tradition going back to ancient Greek-speaking Judaism’ and ‘the enduring presence of Greek Jewish exegesis within rabbinic Judaism, leaving clear marks on commentaries written in Hebrew by Byzantine rabbis’.⁸ The attempt to advance this hypothesis of an enduring Jewish–Greek tradition is seen in a number of Nicholas’s articles relating to manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah, beginning with his publication of a bilingual glossary in 1980,⁹ and arriving at its most compendious expression so far in his *Greek Jewish Texts from the Cairo Genizah* of 1996.¹⁰ While the latter publication is not concerned exclusively with material relating to the Greek Bible and traditions of its translation, one of his more recent projects entitled *Greek Bible in Byzantine Judaism*, secured through a grant from the AHRC, is, its stated aim being to gather ‘evidence for the use of Greek Bible translations by Jews in the Middle Ages, and to make these texts available to scholars as a corpus’; and it promises to furnish the scholarly world with at least three volumes of text and commentary on texts betraying knowledge of the Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible.

While an interest in the Greek Bible runs as a thread through de Lange’s engagement with the subject of Judaism and Hellenism,¹¹ a concern with the life and religiosity of the Judaeo-Greek communities more generally has also been prominent. This can be seen in a number of publications on the Jewish Passover as this was celebrated in the Greek world,¹² together with work on material other than manuscripts, such as inscriptions and medallions.¹³ The most recent manifestation of this interest can be seen in the European-funded project, which aims to map digitally the Jewish communities of the Byzantine Empire, and to collate all the information

⁶ Blondheim 1924; Fernández Marcos 1979.

⁷ De Lange 2009a, 6. The website of the project goes further and states: ‘some Jews continued to use the Greek language throughout the Middle Ages, and that, while the Hebrew Bible came to play a central part in their religious and cultural life, they also knew the Bible in Greek’ (‘Background’, <http://gbbj.org> [4 March 2013]).

⁸ De Lange 2008, 116. ⁹ De Lange 1980; cf. too de Lange 1982.

¹⁰ De Lange 1996a. ¹¹ De Lange 2013b.

¹² De Lange 1999–2000b; 2009b. ¹³ De Lange 1999–2000c; 2001.

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available about them.¹⁴ The project has only recently come to an end, producing an open-access online resource. This body of work considerably extends and amplifies our knowledge of Byzantine Jewry, and will become a hugely significant aid to scholars interested in the subject.

De Lange's work, which emerges in part from an instinctive love of things Hellenic, reflected and encouraged by his study of Classics at Oxford in an atmosphere where an interest in Hellenistic as well as classical Greek was fostered, and stretching to an attachment to the modern state of Greece (Nicholas's concern with the modern period is seen not least in the pages of the *Bulletin* and his own support of the synagogue at Chania in Crete), has, then, contributed greatly to the deepening and enriching of the study of Judaeo-Greek culture. It is work taken up with wide-ranging themes relating to the nature of Jewish history and identity, characteristically based upon painstaking philological and palaeographic labour, as can be seen in his editions of texts from the Cairo Genizah. In fact it is Nicholas's striking ability to combine the activities of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's truffle-seeker, shown through his meticulous examination of manuscripts and his profound linguistic knowledge (the fact that he is a considerable Hebraist has only served to make his contribution to Judaeo-Greek studies more profound, acute, and wide-reaching), with the flair of the Frenchman's parachutist, evidenced in his ability to remain aware of the bigger picture,¹⁵ which distinguishes him as a scholar of versatility and breadth, as much at home in the pithy, philological note as in the more suggestive general essay, brimming with thought-provoking observations.

One could end these introductory remarks by delineating Nicholas's achievements in other areas of Jewish studies, both as an award-winning translator, already described by Amos Oz in the foreword to this volume; as an incisive and interestingly opinionated reviewer of numerous books on a multitude of subjects; or as an authoritative writer on the history and religion of the Jews in books which attain the highest level of what one might term, with a sense of admiration, 'haute vulgarisation'. That would no doubt be appropriate, but both of us as former, and in many ways current, pupils of Nicholas, want to conclude by noting his role as a teacher and leader of and participant in seminars. First we would like to draw attention to his Friday morning Hebrew readings. Conducted

¹⁴ Website: www.mjcb.eu/.

¹⁵ For a discussion of Leroy Ladurie's distinction see Cannadine 1998, 163. Cannadine introduces his discussion of the metaphor by asserting that 'it is alleged' that the Frenchman was responsible for the distinction, indicating that no discussion exists of the matter in the Frenchman's extant works.

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in an informal but always exacting atmosphere, they have been notable for, amongst many other things, their insistence on the need to place Mishnaic, Talmudic or medieval texts in their wider, often classical, setting, so reflecting again Nicholas's concern with the Hellenic background to Jewish culture. Secondly, in these different contexts, whether the seminar room or lecture hall, one has often marvelled at the acuity of an observation or the brilliance of a connection made by Nicholas. In these settings, as much as in his written work, Nicholas shows that, even as he moves into his eighth decade, he has much more to give the world of Jewish studies. They also give ample evidence of the generous manner in which Nicholas has always held his knowledge, keen to share information and to collaborate, the latter quality pungently displayed, *inter alia*, in his successful leadership of two large projects and in the section of the *Bulletin* dedicated to current projects being started or under way and to calls to subscribers to provide information about their most recent work. For Nicholas, then, scholarship is a collective enterprise, enriched by interaction and exchange. This concern was as present at the beginning of Nicholas's career as it is towards its later stages. So in *Origen and the Jews*, resisting the temptation to conclude the work by emphasizing the polemical and rebarbative aspects of that church father's exchange with the Jews, de Lange is more positive and sanguine: 'At a time when Church and Synagogue find themselves drawing closer together once more in the face of a new paganism it is edifying and instructive to contemplate an era when, despite powerful antagonisms, Jews and Christians could live in close harmony and derive mutual benefit from their intercourse.'¹⁶

The chapters in this volume, all written by friends and colleagues of Nicholas, reflect the range of his contribution to Judaeo-Greek studies, in terms of both their chronological spread and subject matter (from the origins of the Septuagint to late Byzantine history) and their genre (from the general survey of a historical period or a central subject, to the more precise examination of a collection of Judaeo-Greek manuscripts).

The volume opens with a section on history. Günter Stemberger assesses evidence for Jewish interest in Greek culture from the time of Alexander the Great to Theodosius II. In the process he tackles many of the central debates which have preoccupied scholars, from the causes of the Maccabean revolt, often conceived as a conflict inspired by cultural tensions, to the purpose of Jewish–Greek literature and to the role of Greek in rabbinic texts. He concludes his piece by warning that the tendency

¹⁶ De Lange 1976, 135.

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to see Hellenization and assimilation as the same thing misrepresents the evidence, noting that Judaism and Hellenism were overlapping, not clashing, cultures. Steven Bowman continues the review of the historical context, covering the Byzantine period, which is conceived here as running from the time of Constantine to the fall of Constantinople. His chapters concentrates on two subjects, that of how to periodize Jewish experience in the Byzantine empire, and Jewish use of Greek. In relation to the former, Bowman argues that a traditional periodization of the history of the Byzantine empire, which roughly falls into three parts, does less justice to the Jewish experience than one which falls into two parts, running from the fourth to the mid-tenth century, and from the last third of the tenth century to the middle of the fifteenth respectively. In his analysis of Jewish use of Greek, Bowman, following de Lange, argues strongly for evidence of ongoing interaction with the language on the part of Jews and discusses major pieces of evidence supporting this view. This section ends with a chapter from Alexander Panayotov. Drawing on his work for the Project on Jewish Communities of the Byzantine Empire, the chapter has the quality of a kind of gazetteer, gathering together extant epigraphic and archaeological evidence for Jews in the Byzantine empire to the twelfth century in the regions of the Balkans, the Aegean archipelago and Cyprus. The evidence, which is supported by relevant literary material, is often tantalizingly fragmentary, but it often shows that in the areas concerned Jews were a well-established presence in spite of the effect of anti-Jewish legislation.

Part II of the volume concerns the historiography of Jewish–Greek interaction. William Horbury discusses the legacy of de Lange's *Origen and the Jews*. After placing the work in its broader historiographic context, highlighting in particular its place in the burgeoning discussion at the time of its publication of Jewish–Christian interaction, Horbury shows how the book contributes to the subject of this volume, especially in pointing up areas where Origen's Greek reflects the language of the rabbis with whom he interacted as well as the latter's exegetical assumptions and procedures, and ongoing interest in the Greek Bible. Origen's work, according to Horbury, is an important witness to the Jewish–Greek tradition, a reminder 'that debate with Jews and enquiry from them could go hand in hand, and that Jewish–Christian relations were often relations between Christians and Jews who both spoke Greek'. This chapter is followed by a short, but suggestive, piece by Giuseppe Veltri in which changing attitudes to the study of the Jewish–Greek tradition are delineated and discussed. Veltri shows how, from the post-Reformation period,

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Christian scholars sought to revive the idea that Hebrew wisdom was the foundation of Greek intellectual culture but how this view came under attack at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Veltri emphasizes how scholars came to assert the superiority of the Greek tradition, seeing it as the forerunner of a universalizing Christianity. Against this background he draws attention to the interest shown by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement in the Jewish–Greek tradition and the diverse areas in which scholars such as Zunz, Geiger and Frankel located this. This work is contrasted with Christian scholarship of the same date, which had a more circumscribed vision of Jewish Hellenism. In some ways the implication of this chapter is that de Lange stands broadly within the tradition of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

There follows a section devoted to the Jewish–Greek tradition and the Bible. James Carleton Paget re-examines the much-discussed area of the origins of the Septuagint, showing how scholars have, by and large, rejected the *Letter of Aristeas* as a reliable indicator of its origins, for theories which are based upon the implications of the character of the Greek used by the translators of the Pentateuch, although many of these theories are subject to criticism. Carleton Paget concludes by suggesting that there are some indications that the original translation was collective in its inspiration, as implied by Aristeas, although involvement of a Ptolemaic monarch is probably unlikely. In a chapter which is partially complementary to Carleton Paget's, James Aitken examines the language of the translation of the Pentateuch. While partly sympathetic to the idea that the oddities of Septuagint Greek can be accounted for by reference to the Hebrew of which it is a translation, Aitken argues that the Greek also reflects the Koine which was prevalent at the time the translation was made, and is sceptical about the idea that the Septuagint witnesses to a Jewish form of Greek, sometimes called Judaeo-Greek. In analysing the social origins of the translators, Aitken draws attention to the way in which their Greek on occasion has a literary quality, betraying a degree of education in the Greek classics. Such 'literary' Greek is not a consistent presence in the translation, but its presence suggests that the translators had a comparable education to Egyptians who had been trained to draft administrative documents of various kinds, for in these we also have evidence of a combination of everyday and more literary Greek. As Aitken writes, 'The Septuagint translators are comparable to the more skilled of these Egyptian bureaucratic scribes, having not achieved the highest level of education, but having acquired enough rhetorical skills and learned enough of classical literature to use it in their work.'

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Cameron Boyd-Taylor begins his contribution by arguing that the history of the Greek Bible amongst Jews should not be described by a ‘narrative of crisis and rupture’. Rather scholars are now in a position to ‘trace a continuous history of Jewish reception (of the Greek Bible) extending from Ptolemaic Alexandria to the fall of Constantinople’. Admitting that the evidence for such a history is fragmentary, Boyd-Taylor seeks to illustrate his contention through a detailed study of the Greek glosses attributed to a source called ‘*to Ioudaikon*’, evidence for which is found both in Codex Ambrosianus and Ra 56. Concentrating on the glosses found in the former but confining his study to those which occur in Deuteronomy, Boyd-Taylor argues that there are enough idiosyncrasies in the translation to which the glosses give evidence to ‘point to a source independent of Christian transmission history’, and to imply the existence within Byzantine Judaism of an evolving tradition of free and colloquial translation into Greek with possibly ancient roots. Rounding off this section is a chapter by Julia Krivoruchko. She examines the question as to whether the Greek of the Constantinopolitan Pentateuch, Greek transliterated in Hebrew characters, should be taken as evidence for a medieval ‘koine’. In a detailed discussion, Krivoruchko argues that the Greek of this text, and biblical Judaeo-Greek more generally, should be seen to reflect not a common spoken Greek, but one deeply affected by the Hebrew from which it was translated: a translationese that represented nobody’s mother tongue.

The final part of the volume consists of a range of chapters charting the Greek element within Jewish ‘culture’. The first of these, by Tessa Rajak, addresses the question of Philo’s Hebrew etymologies and what their presence in his allegorical exegesis implies about his knowledge of Hebrew. Noting that in general scholars have argued that the etymologies derive from a mooted source (often assumed to be an *onomastikon*) or from some evolving tradition, and so prove no knowledge of Hebrew on Philo’s part, Rajak suggests the opposite. Arguing that the debate touches upon a bevy of important issues running from the supposed opposition between Hebraism and Hellenism to the question of Jewish identity in Alexandria, Rajak shows that none of the arguments usually arraigned against Philo’s knowledge of Hebrew as this pertains to the etymologies are decisive. True, there are no compelling arguments on the other side but scholars should be more open to the possibility that the etymologies in Philo, some of which are unique to him, and many of which are more than an adornment to his exegesis, imply a knowledge of the language of Shem on the part of this Platonizing Jew. Francis Schmidt’s contribution continues the Philonic theme, here looking at Philo’s use in his exegesis

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of the technical term *semeion*, connected with Stoic thought. He shows how, in its capacity as a springboard or *aphorme* towards figurative interpretation, the term acts as a link connecting literal and allegorical exegesis. Schmidt notes that its usage is found in Philo's *Historica* rather than his *Nomothetica*, something which should not surprise us.

There then follow two chapters which discuss archaeological evidence for Jews in the late antique period. In the first of these, David Noy examines the problem of identifying a building as a Jewish synagogue, noting that such identification is normally demonstrated through finding a Jewish inscription *in situ* or evidence of a distinctive piece of Jewish iconography, such as a menorah or lulav. Even where, however, such evidence is forthcoming (and that is the case only after 100 CE), Noy notes that ambiguity can still exist. He proceeds to examine four sites which have been held to be Jewish synagogues (Delos, Ostia, Apamea and Mopsuestia), showing how fragile the evidence for such an identification in fact is and suggesting that there is no such thing as a distinctive Jewish architecture.

Because the Jews in classical and late antiquity were not a separate or homogenized group, tracing them through archaeology can never be an exact science. Instead, the shared patterns of architecture and decoration, produced in many cases by the same artisans and workshops, provide room for doubt about what is or is not a synagogue, doubt which only exists as a result of a material culture which was not fundamentally different for pagans, Christians and Jews.

In a piece devoted to the epigraphic footprint of Jews in the ancient world, Pieter van der Horst, after a review of the historiography of this subject, discusses the multiple ways in which inscriptions both complement, and especially, supplement, our knowledge, of Jewish life in the ancient and Byzantine worlds. So, *inter alia*, they give us information about the extent of the diaspora, Jewish names, the average age of death, and the existence of a Judaism which seems unaffected by rabbinic Judaism. Most importantly, perhaps, the inscriptions, the majority of which are preserved in Greek, contradict the view that Jewish culture expressed in that language ended in the first century CE as was once uncritically contended.

Philip Alexander examines the question of rabbinic attitudes to Greek, especially the Greek Bible. In a general discussion of Rabbinic attitudes to translation he notes a spectrum of opinions, but a clear view that no translation was deemed as equivalent of the Hebrew original. He then shows how, by and large, rabbinic knowledge of Greek was limited, and that this in part accounts for the relative absence of knowledge of the Greek Bible in literature associated with the Rabbis. But he also highlights evidence of

a growing negative attitude to the Greek Bible on the part of the Rabbis and argues that this was strongly influenced by the rise of Christianity with its reliance upon the Septuagint in particular. He is clear, however, that the Rabbis may have attempted to influence the western diaspora through the Greek recension associated with Aquila, which he tentatively ascribes to their patronage. He also asserts that there is evidence of Greek-speaking communities in the medieval west who, though rabbinized, retained some knowledge of Aquila and Greek versions, which they used to gloss the original evidence of a murky world of what he takes to be uneasy contact between Hellenism and Judaism. In the next contribution, Gideon Bohak shows how investigation of evidence relating to magic reveals different types of encounters between Hebrew (and, more rarely, Aramaic) and Greek, including both bilingual and trilingual texts and texts that use one writing system to transliterate phrases in the other language. He argues that this material elucidates such subjects as the use of the Hebrew Bible among the Jews of the diaspora in the Roman Empire, and the transliteration of biblical verses in Greek letters as practised by these Jews, as well as opening up questions of intercultural relations especially as these occurred at what Bohak terms ‘ground level’.

Wout van Bekkum’s contribution on *piyyutim* is partly an attempt to elucidate the origins of a form of religious Jewish poetry which may have been influenced by developing forms of the same amongst Christians. Probably emerging in Palestine in the fifth century, this literary form, whose name may derive from the Greek word for a poet or poetry (*poiētēs* or *poiēsis* respectively), was probably the product of cantor poets. Van Bekkum examines a *piyyut*, written by the possibly late fifth-/early sixth-century poet Yehudah. Providing his own translation, van Bekkum plays up the importance to the poet of biblical allusion, the way in which he interacts freely with the biblical tradition, and evidence that the poem possessed didactic and instructional aspirations. But van Bekkum is also clear that the work had a literary purpose, and, more importantly, a wider audience in mind, giving us a vital insight into the ethos of the Byzantine Jewish communities for which the poems were written. ‘*Piyyut* as poetry deserves to be explored and studied as one of the major literary expressions of Judaism and Jewish existence over the course of many centuries’, he concludes. The final Chapter in the collection, by Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, discusses fourteen fragments from the Cairo Genizah taken from nine different Hebrew codices, all of which are palimpsests in Hebrew. These are written over what would seem in the main to be Christian Greek texts of various kinds, ranging from passages taken from