

SUMMARY OF ARTICLE

THE REACTION OF THE HELLENISTIC WORLD TO JUDAISM

by

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It is a commonly known fact that western culture is derived primarily from two sources, one Greek and the other Jewish. The mutual acceptance and rejection on the part of these two cultures has given rise to both co-operation and opposition and has created both crises and new structures. So, the relationship between these two cultures, both positive and negative, has not failed to have its effects upon the cultures of the entire world.

In 1960 the studies of Yohanan Levy appeared under one cover with the title *Two Worlds Meeting*. On the frontispiece were two intertwining patterns, one with the features of Caesar Augustus and the other with the outlines of a menorah and *shofar*. These patterns have broken lines, and you cannot see exactly if they meet. Such a graphic representation left the viewer with the enigmatic question, "Was it an encounter?"

This article will treat only one of those reactions, namely the reaction of the Greco-Roman world to Judaism as an ethnic, social, religious and cultural phenomenon. Our purpose will be to outline in general fashion some broad ideas which we hope will add something constructive to the whole picture.

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The Greeks make their appearance in history as world explorers. Odysseus is depicted as a man who "travelled far and wide ... and saw many cities and peoples and became acquainted with their minds". Herodotus says that Solon's primary purpose was exploration (*Gr. Theoria*) and that a thirst for knowledge drove him to the priests of Egypt, the kings of Persia and Medea, to the Lydians and the Thracians and to many other peoples he happened upon.

As regards the Greeks' knowledge of a people called Jews, it seems that this came later in their history. For Herodotus, as we know, considered the whole area as part of Syria and referred to what was later called Palestine as Syria Palaestina, i. e. Syria of the Philistines. And up to the time of Alexander there is no evidence of the Greeks encountering that people

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living in the mountains who were called Jews, centred around the Temple in Jerusalem, who were in any way distinct from the Philistines on the coast or the Phoenicians in the Shefelah region.

One cannot say that the Greeks would not have been interested in such a people. For in the fourth century B. C. E., after much suffering caused by the Peloponnesian wars and in the face of all kinds of civil disorders at home, the Greeks, especially the intelligentsia, liked to dream of far away places, of Utopias where people lived in peace with their neighbours and governed themselves with laws which enabled every man to live in harmony with himself and with his environment. In particular, those who, as mercenaries or soldiers, were removed far from their homes, often indulged in concocting stories of ideal places and heroes. Thus Xenophon, for instance, wrote a completely imaginary biography of King Cyrus of Persia in whom he saw a fulfilment of his dreams. They also liked to fancy fictitious places of a high level of culture, such as Atlantis, or the Hyperboreans (an imaginary people of the far north).

The minds of these Greeks were especially fascinated by the East. The Greeks have always stood in awe in the presence of the cultures of Asia, especially Egypt, which they considered as their predecessors, the forefathers of their own culture. Plato, for example, places the whole story of Atlantis in the mouth of an Egyptian priest. And it is no surprise that Hecateus, a contemporary of Alexander and, after his death, a right hand man of Ptolemy I in Egypt, wrote a book about Egypt and sang its praises and told of its wonders.

Hecateus is the first Greek who devoted a complete work to the Jews (as Levy proved in the aforementioned book, countering arguments which claimed otherwise). In one of the remaining fragments of this work we read, "The Indians refer to their philosophers as Calani, whereas the Syrians call theirs Jews". Why were they called philosophers? It seems that the Greeks felt that the 'philosophers' of various peoples were to be found among the priests who guarded holy books within the confines of their temples. And it seems obvious that anyone encountering the Jewish community of the fourth century B. C. E., even superficially, would have seen them as a community gathered around the priests of one central temple. For this reason, the Jews of this period would have been thought of as part of the priestly strata of the Syrian society, thus giving meaning to the term 'philosophers'. Hecateus, like Herodotus and other Greek writers, derived his knowledge of these interesting barbarian people from conversations with their priests, which he only partly understood. What he did not understand, he filled in on his own. Thus he found among the Jews enlightened ideas, wholesome customs and an ancient wisdom which was contained in a scroll (obviously the Torah) which the priest carried around with him. This was the normal attitude of the early Greek historians to the people called Jews.

And Hecateus did not stand alone in his generation as regards his own esteem for this small nation.

Nevertheless, it seems quite doubtful that interest in the Jewish community among the Greeks in Alexandria ever reached such a point that King Ptolemy was actively responsible for the translation of the Torah into Greek (a fact that the late Yehoshua Gutman would consider as historical, contrary to the opinion of most scholars). For it is a fact that with all the openness of the Greek spirit to knowledge of far away people in distant places, it was not the custom for the Greek ethnographer to descend to the literary sources of whatever culture he might be describing. Herodotus was often doubtful of the stories which he received from his 'authorities' in each place he visited. And Greek historians after him relied more on their eyes and ears than on any primary sources, and, most likely, relied heavily on previous writers, without bothering to deepen their own knowledge of the various peoples.

It may be very surprising, furthermore, to modern scholars to learn that the nation which laid the foundations of the science of linguistics never concerned itself with learning foreign languages! All the conclusions reached in this area were achieved through comparisons between the various dialects of its own language alone. So hundreds of years passed before the Greeks would condescend to learn the Latin language, the language of the people under whose domination they lived. This disdain for barbarian languages can be seen in the dreadful handling of foreign names by the Greeks, e.g. in the Septuagint.

Moreover, the Greek writer would take the piecemeal and doubtful data from the foreign culture and fit them into the social concepts which his own culture provided. The Greeks had much experience in founding cities. It was their custom, as with Pericles and Protagoras, that the leader would entrust the job of drawing up a new constitution and new laws to a philosopher. The same procedure is followed in Plato's Republic. Thus, since the Greeks saw in Moses the lawgiver of the Jews they immediately made him the founder of the city of Jerusalem. Philo, who knew the Torah well, had to explain why the law was given in the desert and not when establishing a settlement.

In understanding the motives behind the writings of a man like Hecateus about distant places, perhaps we can even pass a milder judgment upon the methodological and technical blunders he committed. The objective of the Greek historians was not so much scientific as literary. Ever since Aristotle taught that poetry was more philosophical than history, inasmuch as the poem reworked the facts in such a way as to derive a lesson, the Greek historian took upon himself the right to shape the events in order to give them more literary value. It was considered the duty of the historian to arouse feelings, to shock, to enthuse, to depict contrasts.

It should be patently clear, after what has been said, why the content of the Torah was of little interest to the Greeks. And even if we should suppose that King Ptolemy accepted a copy of the LXX into his famous library, we cannot discover even the slightest influence of this book upon Greek literature until the Emperor Augustus. And writers of the period continued to write about the Jews, some with hatred and some with admiration, without giving us the slightest intimation that they knew of the Torah having been translated into their own language.

The halo of 'philosophy' which adorned the Jews for the early Greek authors dimmed quite a bit when the Jews ceased being a distant and exotic people and were met daily in business dealings. But the Jews, on their side, were definitely influenced by that ancient designation. The Alexandrian Jews described the Torah both to themselves and to their neighbours as the Perfect Philosophy. This gave rise to strange expressions, such as Flavius Josephus's descriptions of the various parties during the Second Temple period to the Greek reader as various schools of philosophical thought.

The Jews of Alexandria, however, were a far cry from that exotic people of the far east. The products of these Jews in the area of material culture did not engender much esteem. The Jews did not participate very much in the things which attracted the Greeks' admiration, such as the sciences (e. g. astronomy), although a few Jewish writers tried to convince their Greek neighbours that Abraham brought astrology from Mesopotamia to Egypt. In the area of religion the Jews were boring, since they did not indulge in telling fascinating stories of gods in mythologies in which the wise men loved to discover the deepest mysteries of philosophy. And although Philo tried to show that the stories in the Torah did indeed reveal the mysteries of God, nevertheless the images of semi-nomadic patriarchs who lived on sheep and cattle breeding were simply too different from the armoured valiant men who battled over Troy to appeal to the imagination of the Greeks.

One idea of the Jews did, however, receive much attention and admiration, namely the idea of One God, who could not have any graven image in his honour. Thus we find at times a positive attitude towards Moses, whom they regarded as formerly an Egyptian priest(!) who had the insight to oppose animal worship and institute the idea of one God. But the priests who succeeded him(!) made all kinds of absurd laws, which in fact changed the true teaching of Moses and turned the Jewish religion into a sort of superstition which the Jews came to adopt as their religion in later times. This is how Poseidonius describes things, as reported by Strabo (15, 1, 35).

All this should shed some light as to why Hellenistic circles were not moved to take the Septuagint into their hands and read it, even though it was a translation of an ancient book of 'wisdom' from the east. More-

over, the translation was not at all up to the expected standards of Greek literature. It preserved a Hebrew style, debased by the translator. There was certainly no overwhelming interest in Hebrew literature or style at the time, and it would seem far beneath the dignity of an intelligent Greek reader to spend time reading it. But this should not surprise us, since as far as we can see the Septuagint seems to be the first translation of its kind in the whole world.

Nevertheless, there is evidence of at least one unnamed author from the time of Augustus who borrowed words from the Torah and put a Greek cloak on them. After describing in lofty terms the power of the god Poseidon he continues:

“Even the lawgiver of the Jews, a man of high estate, who revealed and came to know the divine might in all its fulness, writes immediately at the beginning of his instruction, ‘And God said ...’ What? ‘Let there be light, and it was so’, and ‘Let the earth come to be, and it was so’”¹

It is interesting to see here how the author adopts the Greek Septuagint quotation to Greek taste (e. g. not repeating the word ‘light’), so that the Greek ear might appreciate it. But more interesting still is the fact that this author saw in the concept of creation by word, and not by generation or work of hands, something of value for the Greek tradition.

When we leave the intellectual circles and go down into the market place of Alexandria among the ordinary people we find even less admiration and esteem for the Jews. Tacitus (*Hist.* 5:4) perhaps sums up the feeling better than anyone else: “Everything which is sacred to us is sacrilege to them, whereas what they are permitted to do is seen as an abomination to us”. The Jews throughout their history in the diaspora consistently refused to change their ways and clung to their ancient traditions even in the face of ridicule from their pagan neighbours. Dietetic laws prevented them from eating in the homes of neighbours. Their concept of only one God prevented them from indulging in syncretism, which was dear to the hearts of the Greeks (e. g. the cult of Sarapis, under Ptolemy I, united some elements of Greek gods with the Egyptian Osiris and Apis). Syncretism was seen as an effort toward peace by bringing peoples together in worship. Thus the Jews now received the reputation of opposing peace. When the Greeks made an effort to identify the ‘God of Israel’ with Dionysius of the Greeks, the Jews of course would have no part in it. The Jews stand out as the only culture of the time unwilling to syncretise their beliefs with pagans. Socially these made them outcasts. Their laws were seen as ‘superstitious’ and we hear echoes of this idea even in later Christian writers.

The Jewish community certainly did all that was humanly possible to show their pagan neighbours toleration, and keep peace. The Septuagint

¹ Ps. Longinus, *περὶ ὑψους* (= On the Sublime) 9, 9.

translated the phrase (Ex. 22:27): "Do not revile God" (אלהים לא תקלל) as, "Do not revile the gods". The Hellenistic Jewish apologists went to great lengths to universalise the sacrifices of the Temple, for instance, as being offered for all mankind and specifically for the welfare of the king. The Jews themselves, it seems, did not indulge in ridiculing the practices of paganism openly. The antagonism to the Jew was not spurred on by religious fanaticism but rather by socio-political consciousness.

In spite of efforts on the part of the Jews to be tolerant, they must have emitted an air of superiority over their neighbours. Utterances of superiority may not have been confined to prayer: daily intercourse with their neighbours may not always have been kept clear of them. Jews necessarily held somewhat aloof from their fellow men and thus earned the reputation of "people who withdraw from man" or "people who hate men".

This last accusation could be phrased differently, "They think everybody hates them!" The supposition of the book of Esther is that 'enemies' exist everywhere, that only a miracle prevented them from destroying all the Jews. The third book of the Maccabees describes an attempt by the later Ptolemies to wipe out all the Jews. Historically speaking, this last affair has been cast into serious doubt. But it shows us that the Jews themselves were prone to invent stories of this kind. The martyr complex resounds throughout the whole fourth book of the Maccabees as well.

A detailed description of writings of the 'haters' of Israel can be gained from a fine article on "Antisemitism" in the *Real Encyclopaedia der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft* by I. Heinemann. More examples could be given, but not here.

As far as the common man was concerned, he saw things like circumcision, Sabbath observance, abstention from pork and the like as superstitions or, as the intelligentsia put it, "perversions" of the original law of Moses. So, in general, the Greeks reacted favourably to Moses the law-giver and to what they considered pure Judaism. But as far as the practices mentioned and others went, the Greeks regarded them as ridiculous.

But as we go further on in time, we find another worry plaguing the intelligentsia, namely the growing interest among not a few Hellenists in this "strange" religion, stemming from a growing dissatisfaction with paganism and its rituals. To the classic traditionalist, the Jews seemed like an army from the east about to invade and take over the capital of the world. History shows that this was not too far from the truth, for that power which finally did win the hearts of people and came to power in Rome indeed had its origins in the land of Judah. There was a threat to the proud humanism of Greece and Rome, and this tore the hearts of the intellectuals. Seneca laments that once more "the vanquished have imposed their law on the victors", meaning the Jews prescribing, as it were, ways of life to the Roman.

Proselytising was certainly engaged in at this time by the Jews. But Hellenistic man was losing confidence in paganism and looking for something to save him from his depression and disappointment. Judaism must have impressed many precisely because of the Jew's manifest certitude about God and life. An inner peace which the Jews surely emitted must have attracted the longing heart of the disgruntled pagan. Thus many conversions occurred.

But what is absolutely missing in Jewish-Hellenistic literature is any personal document of a proselyte, describing the spiritual experiences leading to his conversion. This fact has not yet been sufficiently elucidated. Throughout the history of mankind we find many examples of men announcing to the world the fact of their conversion. Judaism cannot boast of even a fragment of one writer who did anything like that.

We find in many areas of life men proclaiming a turning point in their life as a result of their meeting a man or having an experience of some sort. Of Plato it is told how, after a meeting with Socrates, he cancelled the performance of a play of his which he had prepared. In the *Metamorphosis* of Apuleius (Book 11) we read that at his initiation into the mysteries of Isis the feelings of joy which thrilled and coursed through him led him to sing out a hymn of praise to the goddess. Also those pagans who converted to Christianity wrote their experience down in many works. The driving force behind most early Christian literature is precisely an overwhelming experience of this type which profoundly affected their lives.

Why then are there no Jewish works of this kind? The answer seems to lie in the fact that a convert to Judaism appears to lack this experiential element. The main experience of a proselyte to Judaism is not discovering a new *faith* but attaching himself to a new way of *life*, which he finds in the true law of God's people.

Perhaps we have here an inkling as to why Christianity and not Judaism inherited the pagan world and its people. It is too often said that Christianity's appeal lay in the fact that it did not enjoin its members to keep all the laws of the Torah, but it seems that it is more correct to say that the reason lay in the fact that the pagan was in need of this very same feeling of salvation which he was more likely to experience in Christianity, and not in the way of life of Judaism.

And what about Judaism itself; did it really "meet" the culture of Greece and Rome? In its emergence from the ancient world, it entered into the ghetto, a still more lonely existence than that experienced among the Greeks, leading to the trials and tribulations it would face in the Middle Ages.

Summary by Robert L. Dugas

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