THE *LETTER OF ARISTEAS*: A NEW EXODUS STORY?

BY

NOAH HACHAM

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Summary

A common opinion views the purpose of the *Letter of Aristeas* as strengthening the self-identity of Egyptian Diaspora Jewry by sanctifying the Greek translation of the Torah. As Orlinsky has shown, this view is supported by linguistic and thematic parallels between Aristeas and biblical descriptions of the giving of the Torah. The linguistic and thematic associations, however, do not only apply to this specific biblical episode, but also to the entire book of Exodus including the exodus story itself. The author of *Aristeas* transformed the biblical stories of the exodus and the giving of the Torah into a new foundation story of Egyptian Jewry. In doing so, the new story disregards the biblical hostility to Egypt and instead expresses sympathy for the Ptolemaic king who released the Jews from slavery, settled them in Egypt and initiated the Torah translation into Greek. The aim of *Aristeas* was to offer a religious justification for the residence of Jews in Egypt.

The *Letter of Aristeas* is a treatise sent ostensibly by one Aristeas to his brother Philocrates[1] in which he recounts the meeting of him and

[1] The "letter" is indeed a literary narrative (διήγησις). See e.g.: M. Hadas, *Aristeas to Philocrates (Letter of Aristeas)* (New York: Harper, 1951] 56; E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (rev. ed. by G. Vermes, F. Millar & M. Goodman, 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986) 3:677; cf. S. Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) 29-30; J.M.G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE-117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 138, n. 1; E. S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1998) 207; and recently Sylvie Honigman, *The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria: A Study in the Narrative of the Letter of Aristeas* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003) 30. The real author is not the gentile Aristeas but rather a Hellenized Jew. See e.g.: Hadas, *Aristeas* 5-6; V. Tcherikover, "The Ideology of the Letter of Aristeas," *HTR* 51 (1958) 66; Gruen, *Heritage* 211.

 Journal for the Study of Judaism, XXXVI, 1
Also available online – www.brill.nl

his friend Andreas, one of Ptolemy Philadelphus' bodyguards, with Eleazar, the High Priest in Jerusalem, the purpose of the expedition and its circumstances (*Aristeas* 1-8). Therefore, *Aristeas* should not be viewed only as a historical description of the translation of the Torah into Greek but rather as a narrative recounting the expedition to Eleazar and its outcomes. Accordingly, major parts of the book relate the expedition members' impressions of the Land of Israel, Jerusalem, the Temple and the High Priest and describe in detail the philosophical banquet in which the king and his friends participated together with the seventy-two sages that came from Jerusalem. Clearly then, since it exhibits characteristics of other genres such as utopian geography and philosophy, *Aristeas* should not be regarded as historiography alone.[2] The combination of such characteristics leads one to search for the underlying ideology of this book.

The core of the ideology is easily discernible: a combination of total loyalty to Judaism and deep and active involvement with the Hellenistic world and culture. This combination is revealed in the writer's affection for and identification with the Hellenistic world on the one hand, and in the logic and justice attributed to the laws of the Torah, the central place of God[3] and the importance of the Land of Israel, Jerusalem and the Temple on the other.[4]

This ideology is obviously composed of many minute details, whose interweaving creates the total. One prominent feature of the writer's *Weltanschauung* is his tendency to emphasize the sanctity and authority of the Greek translation of the Torah, by the seventytwo elders, and

---

[2] On the story of the translation as a small frame story in *Aristeas* see e.g. Barclay, *Mediterranean Diaspora* 139; J.J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge & Livonia: W.B. Eerdmans & Dove Booksellers, 2000) 98-99. On the characterization of the components of *Aristeas* see e.g.: Tcherikover, "Ideology," 64, 85; O. Murray, "Aristeas and Ptolemaic Kingship," *JTS* 18 (1967) 349, 371; and recently: Honigman, *Homeric Scholarship* 17-18. However Honigman sees these as digressions while the main topic and genre of the book is to be related to "Hellenistic historiography" (29-35 esp. 30); on the other hand she defines the purpose of the book "to turn the story of the origins of the LXX into a myth" (41), and obviously this cannot be classified as simple "historiography" (39). Indeed, Honigman agrees that "the *Book of Aristeas* is nothing but a vast historical hoax, if we take 'historical' in a modern, positivistic sense" (142); see her detailed discussion in ch. 4 (65-91).

[3] See e.g.: Tcherikover, "Ideology," 71; Barclay, *Mediterranean Diaspora* 145.

[4] This definition of the ideology of the book is prevalent in modern scholarship. See e.g., Tcherikover, "Ideology," 80-83; Barclay, *Mediterranean Diaspora* 139-150, especially 141-143, 147-148, 149-150; Collins, *Athens and Jerusalem* 191-195.

to enhance its legitimacy and the commitment to it.[5] This tendency is evident in a number of details in the narrative as has been pointed out by scholars such as Tcherikover and Orlinsky. First, this translation received the acknowledgement of all the important institutions in the Jewish world. The acknowledgement of the Palestinian Jewry is represented by the High Priest, who chose the translators himself and assigned them the task of translation as well as by the seventy two elders-translators, who constituted an institution parallel to that of the Biblical leadership institution of the seventy elders, and which represents the people in that it consists of six elders from each tribe.[6] The Alexandrian community and its leaders also confirmed their commitment to this translation (308-311) just as the Israelites and their elders confirmed their commitment to the Torah (Exod 19:7-8; 24:3,7). In addition, the translation received also divine confirmation. In contrast to previous failed attempts to publish the Torah in Greek, whose composers were physically inflicted by God for that (313-316), this translation was successful and was accepted. Furthermore, various hints and expressions point at the great significance of the translation, which is similar to the Hebrew version. Thus, the Alexandrian Jews accepted the translation and forbade any additions or detractions (311-312), similarly to the commandments in *Deuteronomy* (4:2; 13:1). And finally, the Ptolemaic king himself was astounded by the contents of the book and acknowledged the sanctity of the translation (312-313,317). Other details in the story may also enhance this tendency.[7]

---

[5] See e.g.: Tcherikover, "Ideology," 74-77; H.M. Orlinsky, "The Septuagint as Holy Writ and the Philosophy of the Translators," *HUCA* 46 (1975) 94-103; B. Bar-Kochva, *Pseudo-Hecataeus 'On the Jews': Legitimizing the Jewish Diaspora* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1996) 233; E. Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999) 45.

[6] Tcherikover ("Ideology," 74) and Orlinsky ("Holy Writ," 98-99) explain the division of the seventy-two translators among the twelve tribes as representing the whole people (Tcherikover) and in order to remind the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai (Orlinsky). However, it seems that not only the twelve tribes but also the very number of the 72 elders have crucial meaning. This number is a variation of the 70 elders, a usual number of the leadership of the people (e.g. Exod 24:1,9; Num 11:16). This variation derives from the story in Numbers 11, in which except of the 70 elders who were stationed around the Tent and prophesied, Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp, thus 72 elders prophesied. By using this number *Aristeas* alludes this story, in order to equate the 72 translators' authority to that of the 72 prophesied elders who supported Moses.

[7] E.g., the superiority of the Greek translated text over that of the original Hebrew; see Tcherikover, "Ideology," 74-75; see also the detailed discussion by Orlinsky, "Holy Writ," 94-103.

Aristeas, then, describes the translation of the Torah into Greek in ways similar to those of the Biblical giving of the Torah, thereby emphasizing the translation's sanctity and authority. Egyptian Jews who need the Torah no longer have to turn to Hebrew-speaking sages: they may rely on the authorized and holy Greek translation. The ideology of *Aristeas* is thus expressed clearly: a total commitment to the Torah and its sanctity on the one hand, and a Greek casting for the Egyptian Jews on the other. In other words, the Torah is accepted into the Hellenistic world with no reservations whatsoever.[8]

It seems that presenting the Greek translation as a renewed giving of the Torah is not the only Biblical narrative that was reformulated in *Aristeas* in order to represent the writer's *Weltanschauung*. Other details in the book seem to be molded in parallel to Biblical narratives as well, thereby contributing to the clarification of the writer's *Weltanschauung*. In the following we will examine the writer's attitude to the Exodus narrative and his utilization of this narrative and, thereby, attempt to illuminate another aspect of this Diaspora-Jew's ideology and the complexity of Jewish life in Hellenistic Egypt.

1. *Liberation from Slavery*

The first part of *Aristeas* (12-27) is devoted to the Egyptian Jews' liberation from slavery. *Aristeas* says that after the royal librarian, Demetrius, came up with the idea of translating the Torah into Greek, Aristeas asked the king to set free the Jews taken prisoner by his father, since it is not reasonable to translate a written work when many of those who live according to its decrees are slaves. The king acquiesced willingly and wholeheartedly and all the Jews in Egypt who were slaves were promptly liberated.

This detail in *Aristeas* is not insignificant and it should not be viewed only as an ornament whose sole purpose is to provide the technical circumstances appropriate for the translation project. In addition to its description of the act of liberation itself, the book reverts to the liberation of the Egyptian Jews in the king's letter to the High Priest Eleazar on the subject of the translation (35-37), and it is emphasized that the king himself especially requested that the act of liberation be mentioned in this letter (33). Moreover, at the beginning of the book, where the

[8] Tcherikover, "Ideology," 76-77; Orlinsky, "Holy Writ," 102-103.

writer elaborates on its contents, he says that besides the deputation to the High Priest Eleazar, its purposes and circumstances (1), he will relate also Aristeas' request for those Jews that had been exiled to Egypt (4).[9] Hence, the request for the liberation of the Jews is worthy of special attention, and is not included in the general category of "the circumstance of the deputation". In other words, the request for the liberation of the Jews and their actual liberation is one of the central issues in *Aristeas*.[10]

True, the importance of this story seems to derive from its implications regarding the nature of the Ptolemaic regime and the preferred attitudes towards this regime. The very gracious and philanthropic monarch treats the Jews accordingly, and, therefore, his regime is worthy of the Jews' appreciation and loyalty. This orientation of the book is similar to that of other Jewish-Diaspora books, which tend to attribute to the local regime kind behavior towards the Jews.[11]

However, one should not ignore this narrative's uniqueness. For any reader with any acquaintance at all with Jewish literature and tradition, there is a big difference between stories about benevolent foreign regimes in general and a story about the liberation of Jews from slavery in Egypt. Apart from the Biblical Exodus story, I know of no other story that reports the liberation of Jews from Egypt. Therefore, one should determine whether there are additional echoes to the story of the Exodus and what the writer's intentions were in creating such a narrative.[12]

---

[9] Ἀξιολόγου διηγήσεως . . . περὶ τῆς γενηθείσης ἡμῖν ἐντυχίας πρὸς Ἐλεάζαρον τὸν τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἀρχιερέα συνεσταμένης . . . περὶ ὧν ἀπεστάλημεν καὶ διὰ τί . . . λαβόντες καιρὸν πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα περὶ τῶν μετοικισθέντων εἰς Αἴγυπτον ἐκ τῆς Ἰουδαίας ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς τοῦ βασιλέως . . . ἄξιόν ἐστι καὶ ταῦτα σοι δηλῶσαι.

[10] See recently: Honigman, *Homeric Scholarship* 31.

[11] E.g. Esther, Daniel, *2 Maccabess* (e.g. ch. 3), Ezra. Although these books describe confrontations between Jews and Gentiles, the benefactor is the Gentile king, who protects the Jews and their privileges.

[12] Honigman, *Homeric Scholarship* 37-63 finds two main themes in the central narrative of *Aristeas*. The second, the Exodus paradigm, is made up of three episodes: the liberation of the Jewish slaves, the selection of the Elders in Jerusalem, and the proclamation of the translation in Alexandria. This paradigm equates the story of the translating of the LXX with the story of the original Hebrew Law, from the Exodus to the revelation, thus equating the status of both texts. Concerning the Exodus story (53-56), she realizes a parallelism between it and *Aristeas*' story of the liberation of the slaves. However, she does not list the parallels and contrasts as will be done here. Her explanation, moreover, which connects it with the authority of the LXX, differs vastly from the interpretation given below. Collins' discussion of the meaning of the liberation story (*Athens and Jerusalem* 99-100) is general and does not relate it to the Exodus story.

A number of motifs seem to be common to the biblical Exodus narrative and *Aristeas*' story. First, in both narratives the Jews were slaves in Egypt and they were numerous. In biblical Egypt, the Israelites, who are said to have vastly increased in number, were enslaved by the Egyptians (Exod 1:6-14) and six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children, departed from Egypt (Exod 12:37). *Aristeas* talks about one hundred thousand prisoners taken from Judaea by Ptolemy I, out of which approximately seventy thousand were enslaved and thirty thousand settled in Egypt's border fortresses (12-14). When Aristeas requested the liberation of the slaves he referred to a little over one hundred thousand people (19), and, in addition, the writer states that Jews that were brought to Egypt previously or afterwards were also slaves (20, 22). The fact that the Israelites and the Jewish slaves came to Egypt from Judaea may be viewed as a further similarity between the two narratives.

In both narratives, the slaves were freed and the liberator was the king himself. In the biblical Exodus, Pharaoh ordered the departure of all the Israelites from Egypt due to the pressure of the plagues (Exod 12:30-32), whereas in *Aristeas* the reason for the order was entirely different, which will be discussed later. Both recount requesting the king to liberate the Jews and in both cases the request includes a reference to the identity of the Jewish God. In the Torah, Moses and Aaron say unto Pharaoh "Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Let my people go" (Exod 5:1) and Pharaoh responds: "Who is the Lord . . . I know not the Lord" (ibid. 2). Subsequently, there are several proclamations that the purpose of the plagues was to let Pharaoh know "that I am the Lord" (Exod 7:17) or similar sentiments.[13] In his *Letter*, Aristeas recounts that he asked the king to free the Jews, and while doing so he told the king that the God of the Jews protects his kingdom, identified the Jewish God with Zeus and described his powers and attributes (15-16).

In both stories, not only the men were liberated. Moses demands the release of the children, both boys and girls (Exod 10:9) and, indeed, the narrative states that the men and the children departed from Egypt (12:37).[14] In *Aristeas* too the women and infants were released together with the men (27).

---

[13] See e.g.: Exod 7:5; 8:18; 9:14, 16, 29.

[14] And of course the women too, but they are mentioned only if they have any role in the story (see: 3:22; 11:2; 15:20).

Another central motif in both narratives is that of property. Already in his covenant with Abram, God promised "and afterward shall they come out with great substance" (Gen 15:14). And, indeed, the description of the Israelites' departure from Egypt emphasizes that they took much Egyptian property with them (Exod 12:35-36).[15] In *Aristeas* too property plays a major role. However, in contrast to the biblical account of the Exodus, the property in *Aristeas* is not taken by the freed slaves but money paid by the king to the slave owners in order to compensate for the loss of their slaves (20,22,24,27). Although the sum paid for each slave is far from the actual monetary value of a slave in the Ptolemaic period, the overall sum, six hundred and sixty talents, is daunting.[16]

The speed at which the king's command is said to have been executed according to *Aristeas* may also be reminiscent of the Exodus story. In *Aristeas*, the king admonishes to free the Jewish slaves quickly. He decrees to complete the registration of all the Jews within three days (24), and the writer adds that the order was fully executed in seven days (27).[17] However, as Westermann notes, the accomplishment of those tasks in either three or seven days is very difficult in Ptolemaic Egypt.[18] The writer, then, wants to create an impression of divine support of the release of the slaves, similar to the divine involvement in the Exodus.[19] The quick liberation of the Jews, may also be reminiscent of the fact that the Israelites left Egypt in haste (Exod 12:33,39; Deut 16:3).

From the above, one may conclude that the writer of *Aristeas* constructed the narrative of the liberation of the Jewish slaves from Egypt in a way similar to the biblical narrative of the Exodus from Egypt.

---

[15] Cf. Exod 3:21-22; 11:2-3.

[16] On the price of a slave in the Ptolemaic kingdom see: W.L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1955) 36; R. Scholl, *Corpus der Ptolemäischen Sklaventexte* (3 vols.; Stuttgart: Steiner, 1990) 1.213.

[17] οὕτω δοχθὲν ἐκεκύρωτο ἐν ἡμέραις ἑπτά. Since the following sentence depicts the amount that was paid for the liberation, it seems that these words describe the execution of the liberation itself and not the decision process. Be that as it may, it does not change the case.

[18] W.L. Westermann, "Enslaved Persons who are Free: Rainer Papyrus (PER) Inv. 24,552," *American Journal of Philology* 59 (1938) 24-25.

[19] Hadas, *Aristeas* 108, on paragraph 27 points out that the author's purpose was to represent the release of the Jewish slaves "as being carried out with miraculous dispatch".

2. *Free Men in Egypt*

Alongside with the similarities between the two narratives, some differences are evident. The stories differ, first and foremost, in the destination of the liberated people. Whereas in the Biblical narrative the Israelites left Egypt in order to go to the land of Canaan, according to *Aristeas* the liberated Jews remained in Egypt and some of them even became part of the Egyptian military and administration (37). Thus, the narrative in *Aristeas* is not a story of the Jews' exodus from Egypt but rather of their freedom from slavery and their integration in Egypt. As Honigman states, it is a "non-Exodus" story.[20]

Other differences between the two narratives exist as well. The Biblical narrative underlines the evilness of Pharaoh, who both enslaved the Israelites and wanted to destroy them.[21] The facts that the persecuted did not do anything wrong and that Joseph, one of their ancestors, provided great benefit to Egypt emphasize the evilness of Pharaoh. The enslavement of prisoners of war, in contrast, was not considered unacceptable or unjust,[22] so doing so to the Jewish prisoners by Ptolemy I cannot be regarded as wicked. Furthermore, the enslavement of the Jews according to *Aristeas* did not derive from evil and hatred of the Jews but, rather, from the coercive pressure of circumstances: *Aristeas* (14 and similarly 23) stresses the fact that Ptolemy I had to make the Jews slaves not for reasons of his policy but because he had to pay his soldiers' wages. Moreover, Ptolemy I did not enslave all the Jews but settled part of them in fortresses along the Egyptian borders (13). Thus, in contrast to Pharaoh, Ptolemy I cannot be considered a Jew-hater even though he captured and enslaved many Jews.[23]

The king's reaction to the request for liberation is also different in

---

[20] Honigman *Homeric Scholarship* 56.

[21] E.g. Exod 1:10,15-17,22.

[22] See Philo, *De Vita Mosis* I 36, who asserts that the Israelites who came to Egypt were enslaved unlawfully, as if they were "captives taken by the custom of war". Thus, enslaving war captives is lawful and moral.

[23] Settling war captives as soldiers in border fortresses was the usual custom of Ptolemaic kings, and is not an indication of a special benevolence towards the Jews. See e.g. *P. Petrie* II 29 (b); III 104 and V. Tcherikover, *The Jews in Egypt in the Hellenistic-Roman Age in the Light of the Papyri* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1963^2) 33 [Heb.]. On the apologetic aim of the emphasis of Josephus on the service of Jews in the Ptolemaic army see V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (Philadelphia & Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society of America & Magnes Press, 1959) 517-518, n. 10. Thus, in a similar way, *Aristeas* draws this settling in positive colors, in order to emphasize the benevolence of the Ptolemaic king and in contrast to the biblical Pharaoh.

the two stories. Pharaoh absolutely refused to free the Israelites and had to allow them to leave Egypt to worship God only after a series of harsh and painful plagues. Ptolemy Philadelphus, in contrast, acquiesced to the request to free the Jews willingly and immediately and, moreover, also freed Jews that were not enslaved by his father but that had become slaves under different circumstances. In contrast to Pharaoh who denied the Jewish God (Exod 5:2), Ptolemy II expresses acknowledgement in God and his powers and even asks that the liberation of the Jews be considered a sacrifice of gratitude to the Jewish God, who is beneficial to his regime (37).

The difference in the king's attitude towards the Jews may be apparent in other details as well. The biblical Exodus story describes hostility and conflict between the Egyptian wise men and sorcerers and Moses and Aaron. The former tried to imitate the latter and to show that the miracles done by Moses and Aaron are nothing special and that they do not profess to the power of their sender.[24] *Aristeas*, in contrast, describes the king's wise men's appreciation of the Jewish elders. In the symposium the king held with the seventy two Jewish elders, the philosophers partaking in the feast expressed their appreciation and joy at the good answers the Jewish elders gave to the kings questions, and especially at their belief in God (200-202,235). Ptolemy Philadelphus' positive attitude towards the High Priest Eleazar may also be viewed as a contrast to Pharaoh's hostility towards Moses and Aaron.

As has been mentioned, a prominent difference between the two stories regards property. In the biblical Exodus, the liberated Israelites took Egyptian goods and "they spoiled the Egyptians" (Exod 12:36). In *Aristeas*, on the other hand, the king compensated the owners of the liberated slaves so that they did not incur any damage as a result of the liberation. Thus, whereas in the biblical Exodus the Egyptians might feel double hostility, both for the liberation itself and for the goods taken from them, in Philadelphus' liberation there is no reason for anger whatsoever.[25] And, indeed, in his letter to the High Priest Eleazar the king states that the compensation prevented potential riots (37)[26] as a result of the liberation of the Jewish slaves.

---

[24] Exod 7:11-12,22; 8:3,14-15; 9:11.

[25] The problematic character of the "borrowing" of property from the Egyptians bothered Jewish writers of the Second Temple period as well as Jewish and Christian authors later. See: L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909-1938) 5: 436-437, n. 233.

[26] διορθούμενοι καὶ εἴ τι κακῶς ἐπράχθη διὰ τὰς τῶν ὄχλων ὁρμάς.

All the differences between the two narratives seem to have a common denominator. The biblical Exodus expresses hostility towards the Egyptians. They enslaved the Israelites harshly, refused to free them, did not recognize the Jewish God and, in addition, the Israelites took Egyptian goods and left Egypt for good. The writer of *Aristeas*, who lived in Ptolemaic Egypt, expresses positive sentiments towards his country and recounts a new story of an exodus from Egypt in a different era. The Jews were, indeed, slaves, but Ptolemy I did this to them under duress, not all of them were enslaved, Ptolemy II admits it was an unfortunate mistake, and once it was recognized the king quickly and willingly ordered the slaves' liberation, compensated the slaves' masters and even acknowledged the God of the Jews. The liberated slaves did not leave Egypt but settled in it and became integrated in the life of the country.

Aristaes' positive tone is also apparent in that he makes no mention whatsoever of the biblical Exodus. Moses too is not mentioned as the one who led the Israelites out of Egypt but only as the lawgiver.[27] Moreover, *Aristeas* quotes two Biblical verses that deal with the Exodus but their meaning is changed radically. In paragraph 155, in a discussion of the reasons for the commandments, the High Priest explains the importance of memory as such a reason. He proves this by quoting the scripture (τῆς γραφῆς ὁ λέγων οὕτως) "Thou . . . shalt well remember what great and marvelous things the Lord thy God did in thee . . ." (Μνείᾳ μνησθήσῃ κυρίου τοῦ ποιήσαντος ἐν σοὶ τὰ μεγάλα καὶ θαυμαστά). According to *Aristeas*, the obligation to remember the great and marvelous things means to remember God who rules and controls both body and soul (166-167). Now, as many scholars have noted, the words ascribed to the High Priest are a combination of two verses in *Deuteronomy*: "Thou shalt well remember what the Lord thy God did" (Deut 7:18) and ". . . thy God, that hath done for thee these great and marvelous things" (Deut 10:21). What has not sufficiently been noted, however, is that in their biblical context both of these verses pertain to the exodus from Egypt. The former verse continues "unto Pharaoh and all Egypt" and the verse following the latter is "Thy fathers went down into Egypt with seventy persons and now the Lord thy God hath made thee as the stars of heaven for multitude" (Deut 10:22).[28] *Aristeas*, then,

[27] *Aristeas* 144 (named Moses), 131,139,148,312 (referred to as "νομοθέτης"—lawgiver).

[28] Note that the Exodus is mentioned previously (Deut 10:18) and later (11:2-4).

ignores the Exodus mentioned in these verses and interprets them in a different context, unconnected to this issue.[29] Aristeas' tendency to ignore the biblical narrative of the Exodus, thus, seems to have guided his use of these verses as well.[30]

3. *After Liberation*

The parallel between *Aristeas* and the foundation stories of the people of Israel is not restricted to the Exodus story. As mentioned above, the description of the translation of the Torah into Greek and its acceptance also contains parallelisms to the Biblical narrative of the giving of the Torah. Apparently, placing the liberation prior to the translation and rendering it a condition for the translation are also formed according to the Biblical model, in which the Exodus both preceded the giving of the Torah and took place in order to enable it.[31] The outcome regarding the image of the king is similar: the positive description of the Ptolemaic king, which derives from the fact that he is the initiator of the translation project and urges its execution, is commensurate with his positive image as depicted in the narrative of the release of the Jewish slaves.

These, however, are not the only parallels. *Aristeas* contains another description that is reminiscent of an Israelite foundation story. According to *Aristeas*, the king sent numerous gifts to the Temple in Jerusalem with the expedition to the High Priest. These gifts included various

---

[29] H.G. Meecham (*The Letter of Aristeas: A Linguistic Study with Special Reference to the Greek Bible* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1935] 317-318) viewed this ignorance of the Exodus and the focusing of the verse on the memory as an example of allegorical interpretation of the Torah that was prevalent in Hellenistic Egypt, including the writer of *Aristeas*. However, the fact that the very verses that originally deal with the Exodus are applied to a different, unconnected subject is not coincidental.

[30] *Aristeas* also discusses (159) the meaning of the commandment of phylacteries, but although the Exodus is connected to the phylacteries (Exod 13:9,16) it is not mentioned in this connection by *Aristeas*—just as *Aristeas* ignores the Exodus altogether. However there might be a special reason for this, as we may infer from the fact that *Aristeas* deals in the same context (158-160) with the commandments of fringes, mezuzah and the obligation to meditate on the ordinances of God when lying down and rising up. Obviously, *Aristeas* is relating here to the biblical Shema texts (Deut 6:4-9; 11:13-21), and since they—as opposed to Exod 13—do not relate to the Exodus story it may be that Aristeas' failure to do so needs no special explanation.

[31] Apart from the nine occurrences of שלח את עמי ויעבדני ("Let my people go that they may worship Me") or similar expressions, note especially on Exod 3:12: "when you have freed the people from Egypt you shall worship God at this mountain". See also: Honigman *Homeric Scholarship* 56.

implements for the Temple, of which the golden table is especially mentioned. *Aristeas* says that the king wanted to build a huge dimensioned table but after he discovered the size of the table in the Temple in Jerusalem, he ordered his table to be constructed in this exact same size (52-57). Scholars have already noted that in several places, this description uses the language of the biblical commands pertaining to the table of the Tabernacle and, building upon this, have inferred that the version of the Torah used by our author matched that of the *Septuagint* and not the Masoretic Hebrew text.[32] As for the Ptolemaic king's portrayal, once again he is described positively as one who makes donations to the Temple and makes sure that these donations are in accordance with the laws of the Torah.[33] However, the fact that the king builds one of the Temple's implements in accordance with the Torah's decrees regarding the construction of the Tabernacle and the linguistic parallels between the two descriptions reveals an attempt to form the king's image with ingredients taken from the narrative of the construction of the Tabernacle. In other words, just as the Tabernacle was constructed in the book of *Exodus*, so were implements of the Temple built in *Aristeas* and the Ptolemaic king, the builder, is thus described in parallel to Moses, the builder of the Tabernacle—just as, of course, he is a latter-day Moses by virtue of his central role in the giving of the Law. The event of building the Temple implements described in *Aristeas* joins the liberation of the slaves in Egypt and the translation of the Torah as the third part of a trilogy of the foundation story of the people of Israel. The prominent differences between *Aristeas*' rewritten version of Israel's foundation narrative, on the one hand, and the original biblical version, on the other, are pinpointed in the location and the leader: in Egypt and not in severing connections with it, and under the leadership of the local king and not against him and in conflict with him.

A fourth link may possibly be joined to this chain. V. Tcherikover states that "the statement that the area of the Land of Israel is about 60 million arourai (a figure out of all proportion) is based on the figure of 600,000 Jews of the Exodus . . . every one of whom, Aristeas fancied, received a lot of 100 arourai." And he notes: "This last figure had

[32] Meecham *Letter of Aristeas* 316-317; Hadas, *Aristeas* 121.

[33] On the contrast between this king and Ptolemy IV as is portrayed in *3 Macc* see my dissertation: N. Hacham, *The Third Book of Maccabees: Literature, History and Ideology* (dissertation: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2002) 192 [Heb.].

a special meaning for the Egyptian Jews. Foreign soldiers, including Jews, received from the Ptolemaic authorities lots of 30 . . . and even 100 arourai . . . A lot of 100 arourai was the biggest lot a soldier could ever get. Soldiers who received 100 arourai constituted a kind of aristocracy within the Ptolemaic army. Aristeas, in giving to every one of the 600,000 Jews of the Exodus the maximum number of arourai, expressed by this the dream of every Jewish soldier of Egypt to belong to this aristocracy."[34]

From a slightly different angle, one might say that *Aristeas* hereby expresses his view that the Jews of the Exodus settled in the Land of Israel under the same conditions as did soldiers who receive land from the king upon discharge. In other words, this Exodus was not slaves abandoning their Egyptian masters but a discharge of soldiers and their settlement in lands given to them by the king. Thus, the settlement of the Jews in the Land of Israel may be viewed as the generous project of the Egyptian king.[35]

In any case, we have seen that *Aristeas* forms its narrative in parallel to the Biblical foundation stories of the Israeli people: the Exodus, the construction of the Tabernacle, the giving of the Torah and perhaps also the settlement in the Land of Israel.

In addition to other non-historical details,[36] this formulation of the details in the stories in *Aristeas* shows that they do not recount historical reality. Historical facts obviously exist in the background: it is probable that Ptolemy I exiled Jews from their land to Egypt and that some of them were enslaved. We have Ptolemy Philadelphus' royal decrees regarding the liberation of slaves who were unjustly enslaved. Although these decrees do not relate to Jews, it is not impossible that a similar decree was also given regarding a group of Jews. It is also probable that the translation of the Torah into Greek was made in the days of Philadelphus, although the issue of the credibility of the initiative and the royal support are a matter of controversy.[37] Other details may be

---

[34] Tcherikover, "Ideology," 78, and n. 39.

[35] *Aristeas* lists the seaports of the land of Israel (115), and relates especially to Ptolemais (Akko), which he tells about its foundation by the king and its excellent location. One may understand this detail as well as expression of the Ptolemaic king's benevolence towards the Jews and his contribution to building their land.

[36] E.g. six elders from each tribe; Demetrius of Phalerum as the initiator of the translation etc. On the historical reliability of *Aristeas* see recently: Gruen, *Heritage* 208-210; Honigman, *Homeric Scholarship* 93-143.

[37] On the Jews exiled and enslaved by Ptolemy I see the summary of Honigman, *Homeric Scholarship* 54-55; on the liberation see Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization* 274;

dealt with in this manner, but we are not concerned with the historical cores of some of the details recounted in *Aristeas*, but with the ideological and historical significance of this literary formulation of this narrative.

4. *Legitimization of Living in Egypt*

The question arising is, therefore, what ideological purpose of the writer led him to recount the story of the liberation of the Jewish salves in a form similar to that of the biblical Exodus.

It seems that the purpose of reformulating a foundation story such as the Exodus, the building of the Tabernacle and the giving of the Torah is updating and adaptation, thereby formulating a new foundation story. Such a story seems to solve two serious identity problems facing Egyptian Jewry. First, it may derive from the difficulty to settle the discrepancy between the traditional sanctioned Jewish stand regarding Egypt with the fact that Jews, including the author, reside in Egypt. According to the Torah, the religious and national definition of the people of Israel is intimately linked to the Exodus. The nation of Israel was formed in this Exodus and God appears to the people in the Ten Commandments saying "I am the Lord thy God which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt" (Exod 20:2). In light of this, the Torah's reservation regarding a return to Egypt—"since the Lord has warned you 'You must not go back that way (= to Egypt) again" (Deut 17:16)—is obvious.[38] Under such circumstances, a Jew residing in Egypt and loyal to his fathers' traditions may require some justification for his place of residence so that he will not be found to be acting against the expectations of the Torah.[39] The parallels and the differences between

---

on the time of the translation see Honigman, 137; on the royal support see Honigman, 138 and Gruen, *Heritage* 208-209 and n. 67.

[38] Exod 14:13; Deut 17:16; 28:68. One can add the prohibition to Isaac "Do not go down to Egypt" (Gen 26:2), and the encouragement to Jacob to go down to Egypt (Gen 46:3-4), which hints on the problematic character of this act. The biblical attitude towards returning to Egypt is a problem even if one interprets those verses as a promise and not as a command; on that problem see e.g. J.H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia & Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996) 167. On the negative attitude towards dwelling in Egypt in post-biblical literature see: Bar-Kochva, *Pseudo-Hecataeus* 235-237.

[39] As I.M. Gafni, *Land, Center and Diaspora: Jewish Constructs in Late Antiquity* (JSPS 21; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 19-40, has shown that the problematic character of the phenomenon of Diaspora itself bothered the Jews in late antiquity, and several solutions were given to this dispersion. However, dwelling in Egypt is more problematic, and *Aristeas* faces this problem.

the biblical narrative of the Exodus and the liberation of the slaves in *Aristeas* may constitute such a justification. In other words, the Ptolemaic kingdom is not similar to Pharaoh's Egypt. The latter deserves the Jews' hostility since it treated its Jews in such a manner. The former, however, treated the Jews benevolently. It is true that Egypt was initially a place of exile; however, the gracious Egyptian Ptolemaic king liberated the slaves and showed them his kindness, which is in total opposition to Pharaoh's behavior. Thus, the new Egypt is different from the old one and, therefore, the Torah's negative attitude does not relate to the new Egypt, and in fact, there is no religious reason preventing residence in Egypt.[40] In addition, when the people of Israel were formed as a people in the ancient Exodus, Pharaoh would not recognize the Jewish God, and the people were expelled from Egypt and turned to another country. Now, in the Ptolemaic regime, the Jews' liberation from slavery does not require or justify their leaving Egypt, since the king himself liberated them and, moreover, recognizes and respects their God. Indeed, Aristeas explains to the king that the God of the Jews is the same God whom everyone, including the king himself, fear, although the king and his entourage call him by a different name (16). Not only that, but the Ptolemaic king initiates and supports important Jewish projects: he participates in building the Temple implements, supports the translation of the Torah into Greek and is impressed by its holiness. Therefore, leaving Egypt is unfitting as it is where a new world is created regarding Jews, a world of mutual appreciation and foreign participation in the Jewish religion.

In his paper on *Aristeas*, Tcherikover claims that in the narrative of the translation of the Torah into Greek, the writer tries to say that the Jews will be able to conduct their worship in Greek and will no longer require Hebrew. The Greeks, too, will be able to read the Torah and acknowledge its divinity.[41] Thus, via the translated Torah, the Jews will be able to be socially and culturally integrated in the Hellenistic world. In light of our claims, this point should be elaborated. *Aristeas* views the translation of the Torah into Greek not only as enabling entrance

---

[40] Later rabbinical authorities, trying to elucidate why Maimonides' dwelling in Egypt was not opposed to the halachic prohibition, suggest a similar explanation. See summary of the discussion in: Rabbi E.Y. Waldenberg, Responsa *Ziz Eliezer* 14 (Jerusalem: 1981) no. 87 pp. 156-160 [Heb.], and especially the opinion of R. David ben Isaac, Responsa *Dei Hashev* (Livorno: 1857; reprinted, Brooklyn: Torah Ohr, 1992) no. 15, pp. 38-41, esp. 39-40 [Heb.].

[41] Tcherikover, "Ideology," 76-77.

to the Hellenistic world. Rather, via the narrative of the liberation of the Jews and the king's contribution to saving the Jewish religion he formulates a foundation story of the Alexandrian Jewry, which is, in a certain sense, a foundation story of the Jewish Hellenistic identity as a whole: loyalty to the Torah, residence in Egypt with the Torah in Greek, and an acknowledgement of the centrality of the Temple in Jerusalem and the importance of the Land of Israel as the land of the Jews. This is a Jewry that interweaves different worlds, which is also accepted and regarded empathetically by the Hellenistic world, into which it wants to be accepted.

Aristeas is not the only source pointing at the problem that the Biblical Exodus posed for the Jews of Hellenistic Egypt. B. Bar-Kochva claimed that this was the goal of another work written by an Egyptian Hellenistic Jew, which is presented in Josephus (*Contra Apionem* I, 183-205), under the name of Hecataeus of Abdera, dealing with the High Priest Hezekiah's emigration to Egypt in the days of Ptolemy I.[42] Other scholars deal with the difficulty posed by the narrative of the Exodus for the Jews in Hellenistic Egypt, but they focused on the social aspect, which we will now discuss.

5. *Jews and Greeks Together*

There are hints of the Egyptians' objections to the Jewish Passover celebration from as early as the days of the Persian regime.[43] Hostile Egyptian traditions regarding the Exodus, which portray the Jews in a mocking and contemptuous manner, seem to have been created in these times and to have continued in the Hellenistic period and they constitute expressions of ancient anti-Semitism or Judeophobia. One of the reasons for this was the annual Passover celebration, which commemorates the Exodus and thus shows no affinity to Egypt. The Egyptian priests could not not react to this story, which characterizes the Egyptians as evil and mocks their humiliation and defeat. Thus were formed the

---

[42] Bar-Kochva, *Pseudo-Hecataeus* 229-230, 232-237, 250-251. Gruen too, *Heritage* 70-71, thinks that the Jews needed "justification for their return" to Egypt. Nevertheless, the need for such a "justification" in Gruen's view is not a religious identity problem but rather the foreignness of the Jews in an alien country (see e.g. pp. 54 and 64).

[43] B. Porten, "The Jews in Egypt," *The Cambridge History of Judaism* (3 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-1999) 1.389; B. Bar-Kochva, "Lysimachus of Alexandria and the Hostile Traditions Concerning the Exodus," *Tarbiz* 69 (1999/2000) 498 and n. 122 [Heb.].

stories hostile to the Jews, that constituted one of the reasons for the tension between Jews and Egyptians in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt.[44]

This issue is connected to another accusation against the Jews, which was prevalent in the Hellenistic-Roman world. Due to their segregation in matters of food and ritual, the Jews are often accused of misanthropy: the Jews do not eat or drink with foreigners nor do they participate in their rituals and festivities. Such behavior must attest to their misanthropy and arrogance. This accusation contributed to the enhancement of Jew hatred in the ancient world and several Jewish writers attempted to refute it.[45]

This accusation obviously bothered the writer of *Aristeas*. In the section on the reasons for the commandments, much attention is devoted to forbidden foods, whose purpose is to remove one from evil and corruption and the creation of a just society.[46] Clearly, these forbidden foods are not an expression of man-hatred but of evil-hatred and the Torah's decree of segregation is only directed at immoral people. Thus, the isolation is not based on ethnicity but on morality. It is not against non-Jews but against those who behave inappropriately. The Greeks, therefore, are not part of this group as they are cultured and moral.

Indeed, the following section in *Aristeas* contains a detailed description of seven symposia attended by the king and the Jerusalemite Jewish sages (182-294). Like other Greek symposia, those symposia included a feast, wine drinking, and philosophical discussions, in which all attendants participated.[47] The Jews did not refrain from reclining in the banquet with the foreign king, obviously because of his positive traits, and because such a person will not affect the Jews dining with him in any negative way.

---

[44] The literature on ancient anti-Semitism is huge. See recently summary and bibliography by Bar-Kochva, "*Lysimachus*," 497-501, 506. The hostile character of the Egyptian traditions is accepted by the majority of scholarship. Even if one accept Gruen's dissenting view on the whole issue (*Heritage*, 41-72, esp. 62) it does not change the case here, since it is clear that Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman periods tried to explain their segregation from gentiles.

[45] See e.g. *III Maccabees* 3:2-7; *Additions to Esther* B,4-5, E,15.

[46] In paragraphs 128-171 *Aristeas* "cites" the apology of the High Priest to the commandments. The central problem, which bothered the author, is the laws concerning forbidden food. This subject frames the apology: with this it starts (128-129) and with this it ends (168-169), and indeed all the High Priest's explanations deal with these laws and the principles deriving from them.

[47] On the general character of those symposia and the parallel symposia in the Greek world see, e.g.: Hadas, *Aristeas* 42-43; Tcherikover, "Ideology," 64; Honigman, *Homeric Scholarship* 18. As Gruen, *Heritage* 215 notes "The symposium in which the Jerusalemite sages were interrogated, of course, constitutes a fully Greek setting".

Aristeas, then, is disturbed by the social problem of the relations between Jews and their foreign environment and tries to bridge this gap. The formulation of the story of liberation of the slaves in *Aristeas* in the format of the biblical Exodus seems to serve this end. As aforementioned, no financial damage was incurred and the liberation expresses the regime's positive attitude towards the Jews. Thus, the fact that the Jews went from slavery to freedom should not be a factor that separates Jews and Gentiles. In contrast to the biblical narrative, which enhances Jewish-Egyptian hostility, this story of the new exodus eliminates any residue of hostility and creates an atmosphere of intimacy and cooperation between Jews and their Gentile environment. Thus, via the foundation story of the Jewish community in Egypt, which differs from the biblical Exodus, *Aristeas* wants to establish norms of intimacy and cooperation between Jews and Gentiles. This is not an attempt to react to the hostile Egyptian accounts of the Exodus or an apologetic attempt to convince the Gentiles of the Jews' good intentions, but a narrative that the Jews, who are familiar with the biblical Exodus narrative, are supposed to understand better than anybody else.[48] The liberation of the Jews and their resettlement in Egypt mean identification with the regime, a belonging to the foreign world in which the Jews live and a cancellation of the old reasons for hostility. However, it is clear that the Egyptian accusations regarding the beginnings of the Jewish people are irrelevant, since the presence of the Jews in Ptolemaic Egypt came to be with the regime's agreement and not via conflict.

One hint in *Aristeas* suggests that in the writer's world as well, Gentiles, or, rather, Greeks and Egyptians must be differentiated. In paragraph 138, Aristeas ridicules animal rituals and mentions the Egyptians as an example of those fools who participate in such rituals.[49] Such people,

---

[48] The view of Tcherikover ("Ideology," 60) and Orlinsky ("Holy Writ," 100) on the intended Jewish readership of *Aristeas* is again bolstered. Because of ignorance of the biblical stories, a non-Jewish intended readership would miss these hints to the Bible, and only one who knows the biblical story can be viewed as the intended readership. Thus, if my thesis on the centrality of the Exodus story in *Aristeas* is accepted, it seems implausible to accept Beavis' (M.A.L. Beavis, "Anti-Egyptian Polemic in the Letter of Atisteas 130-165 [the High Priest's Discourse]," *JSJ* 18 [1987] 145-151) and Barclay's (*Mediterranean Diaspora* 148-149) view, that the book was addressed to non-Jews as well. On the intended readership cf. Honigman, *Homeric Scholarship* 27-29.

[49] On the unesteemed image of the Egyptians in the Hellenic and Hellenistic world see e.g.: G. Bohak, "Ethnic Stereotypes in the Greco-Roman World: Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Jews," *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division B: History of theJewish People* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2000) 11.

then, are the kind that the Torah demands the Jews to remove themselves from because of their views and traits.[50] The Greeks, on the other hand, are clearly not such people because they know that the Jewish God is identified with Zeus, although he is called by different names. Note, however, that this attitude towards the Egyptians is not emphasized in the book, probably because *Aristeas*' aim is to reduce the social gaps between Jews and Gentiles and not to accentuate the Jews' otherness.

At the beginning of this paper, the ideology of the *Letter of Aristeas* was defined as a combination of total loyalty to Judaism with deep and active involvement in the Hellenistic world and culture. The view that this book provides a new account of the foundation stories of the Israelites, namely the Exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Torah, the construction of the Tabernacle and perhaps the settlement in the Land of Israel—as taking place in Egypt, or as a result of the activities of the gracious Ptolemaic-Egyptian king—in order to provide a religious justification for residence in Egypt and to create friendly relations between Jews and foreigners in Egypt, is in line with this ideology.[51] Moreover, if the *Letter of Aristeas* should be viewed in this manner, it should not be viewed as just another book emanating from this ideology, but rather, as a book that attempts to create a foundation story for this ideology—the foundation story of the Hellenistic Jewry.[52]

---

[50] However, even in those people one can find ray of light: *Aristeas* states that the Egyptians' priests have named the Jews "men of God" (140), i.e. they acknowledge the spiritual advantage of the Jews.

[51] Dov Gera ("On the Credibility of the History of the Tobiads [Josephus, *Antiquities* 12, 156-222, 228-236]," *Greece and Rome in Eretz Israel: Collected Essays* [eds. A. Kasher, U. Rappaport & G. Fuks; Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi & Israel Exploration Society, 1990] 37-38; idem, *Judaea and Mediterranean Politics 219 to 161 B.C.E.* [Leiden, New York & Köln: Brill, 1998] 57-58, and n. 91) shows that *Aristeas* is influenced by another biblical story: that of Joseph. As Gera emphasizes, "it was designed to stimulate the self-confidence of the Jews of Ptolemaic Egypt and to demonstrate that in the past Jews had played an important role in the service of" the king. In light of the hypothesis in this paper one can accept Gera's view, although it may be defined slightly differently. Joseph typifies the ancient example of succesful settlement of Israelites in Egypt. By alluding to this figure as well as to the Exodus, *Aristeas* may be understood as justifying the Jewish dwelling in Egypt in his days: Because the relationships with the Ptolemaic king are like those in the days of Joseph, no exodus is needed, and as Joseph was released from slavery and became an integral part of Egypt while being a pious Israelite, so can we be such in the Ptolemaic era.

[52] This paper grew out of a footnote in my 2002 Hebrew University dissertation cited avobe, n. 33. The core of the paper was presented in a seminar of the Dept. of Bible of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and at the November 2003 Annual Meeting of the SBL in Atlanta. My thanks to the participants in the two occasions for their

helpful remarks, and to Dr. Baruch J. Schwartz who invited me to the seminar. I thank also Prof. Daniel R. Schwartz who read a previous version of this paper and Prof. Louis H. Feldman who read the version presented at the SBL and sent me his comments. The preparation of this paper was supported by post-doctoral grant of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.