

The Jews of Egypt

Torah in Motion, Class 3: Alexandria
Dr. Malka Z. Simkovich
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1. The Letter of Aristetas¹

Aristetas 9–11

Demetrius of Phalerum, the president of the king's library, received vast sums of money, for the purpose of collecting together, as far as he possibly could, all the books in the world. By means of purchase and transcription, he carried out, to the best of his ability, the purpose of the king. On one occasion when I was present he was asked, "How many thousand books are there in the library?" and he replied, "More than two hundred thousand, O king, and I shall make endeavor in the immediate future to gather together the remainder also, so that the total of five hundred thousand may be reached. I am told that the laws of the Jews are worth transcribing and deserve a place in your library." "What is to prevent you from doing this?" replied the king. "Everything that is necessary has been placed at your disposal." "They need to be translated," answered Demetrius, "for in the country of the Jews they use a peculiar alphabet (just as the Egyptians, too, have a special form of letters) and speak a peculiar dialect. They are supposed to use the Syriac tongue, but this is not the case; their language is quite different." And the king when he understood all the facts of the case ordered a letter to be written to the Jewish High Priest that his purpose (which has already been described) might be accomplished...

Aristetas 16–19

These people worship God the overseer and creator of all, whom all men worship including ourselves, O King except that we have a different name. Their name for him is Zeus and Jove... Sosibius and some of those present thus said, "It is worthy of your magnanimity to offer the release of these men as a thank offering to the Most High God. You are highly honored by the Lord of all, and have been glorified beyond your ancestors, so if you make even the greatest thank offerings, it befits you." ...

Aristetas 41–46

Eleazar the high priest to King Ptolemy, dear friend, greeting. Good health to you and to Queen Arsinoe, your sister, and to your children; if that is so, it would be well, and as we wish. We too are in good health. On receipt of your letter we rejoiced greatly because of your purpose and noble plan; we therefore collected together the whole multitude and read it to them, that they might know your piety toward our God. We also showed them the vessels which you sent, twenty of silver and thirty of gold, five cups, and a table for offering, and for the performance of the sacrifices and the furnishing of the Temple requirements one hundred talents of silver, brought by two men highly esteemed by you, Andreas and Aristetas, gentleman of integrity, outstanding in education, worthy in every respect of your conduct and justice. They also communicated to us your messages, in reply to which they have heard from us also sentiments consist with what you wrote. Everything which is to your advantage, even if it is unnatural, we will carry out; this is a sign of friendship and love. You have also bestowed great unexpected benefits upon our citizens in many ways. We therefore offered sacrifices without delay for you, your sister, your children, and your friends. The whole multitude made supplication that it should come to pass for you entirely as you desire, and that God the ruler of all should preserve your kingdom in peace and glory, and that the translation of the sacred Law should come to pass in a manner expedient to you and in safety. In the presence of the whole assembly we selected elders, honorable men and true, six from each tribe, whom we have sent with the Law in their possession. It will be a noble deed, O Righteous King, if you command that once the translation of the books is complete these men be restored to us again in safety. Farewell.

¹ Translation of Aristetas by R. J. H. Shutt in James H. Charlesworth, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984) 7–34. Translation of Philo of Alexandria mostly from F. H. Colson, *Every Good Man is Free. On the Contemplative Life. On the Eternity of the World. Against Flaccus. Apology for the Jews. On Providence* (LCL 363; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941); translation of *On the Confusion of Tongues* from F. H. Colson, *On the Confusion of Tongues. On the Migration of Abraham. Who Is the Heir of Divine Things? On Mating with the Preliminary Studies* (LCL 261; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932). Whiston's translation which is generally not preferred.

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Aristeas 121–124

I have explained to you in summary form, brother Philocrates, as much as was needful concerning these matters, and we will next expound details of the translation. Eleazar selected men of the highest merit and of excellent education due to the distinction of their parentage; they had not only mastered the Jewish literature; but had made a serious study of that of the Greeks as well. They were therefore well qualified for the embassy, and brought it to fruition as occasion demanded; they had a tremendous natural facility for the negotiations and questions arising from the Law, with the middle way as their commendable ideal; they forsook any uncouth and uncultured attitude of mind; in the same way they rose above conceit and contempt of other people, and instead engaged in discourse and listening to and answering each and every one, as is meet and right. They all observed these aims, and went further in wishing to excel each other in them; they were, one and all, worthy of their leader and his outstanding qualities. It was possible to perceive how inseparable was their attachment to Eleazar, and his to them. In addition to writing to the king concerning their reestablishment, he urged Andreas to take many active steps to this end, asking him to collaborate to the utmost extent of our ability.

Aristeas 139–159

Now our Lawgiver being a wise man and specially endowed by God to understand all things, took a comprehensive view of each particular detail, and fenced us round with impregnable ramparts and walls of iron, that we might not mingle at all with any of the other nations, but remain pure in body and soul, free from all vain imaginations, worshipping the one Almighty God above the whole creation. Hence the leading Egyptian priests having looked carefully into many matters, and being cognizant with (our) affairs, call us "men of God". This is a title which does not belong to the rest of mankind but only to those who worship the true God. The rest are men not of God but of meats and drinks and clothing. For their whole disposition leads them to find solace in these things. Among our people such things are reckoned of no account. but throughout their whole life their main consideration is the sovereignty of God. Therefore lest we should be corrupted by any abomination, or our lives be perverted by evil communications, he hedged us round on all sides by rules of purity, affecting alike what we eat, or drink, or touch, or hear, or see. For though, speaking generally, all things are alike in their natural constitution, since they are all governed by one and the same power, yet there is a deep reason in each individual case why we abstain from the use of certain things and enjoy the common use of others. For the sake of illustration I will run over one or two points and explain them to you. For you must not fall into the degrading idea that it was out of regard to mice and weasels and other such things that Moses drew up his laws with such exceeding care. All these ordinances were made for the sake of righteousness to aid the quest for virtue and the perfecting of character. For all the birds that we use are tame and distinguished by their cleanliness, feeding on various kinds of grain and pulse, such as for instance pigeons, turtle-doves, locusts, partridges, geese also, and all other birds of this class. But the birds which are forbidden you will find to be wild and carnivorous, tyrannizing over the others by the strength which they possess, and cruelly obtaining food by preying on the tame birds enumerated above and not only so, but they seize lambs and kids, and injure human beings too, whether dead or alive, and so by naming them unclean, he gave a sign by means of them that those, for whom the legislation was ordained, must practice righteousness in their hearts and not tyrannize over any one in reliance upon their own strength nor rob them of anything, but steer their course of life in accordance with justice...Our legislator taught us therefore that it is by such methods as these that indications are given to the wise, that they must be just and effect nothing by violence, and refrain from tyrannizing over others in reliance upon their own strength.. Wherefore all the rules which he has laid down with regard to what is permitted in the case of these birds and other animals, he has enacted with the object of teaching us a moral lesson. For the division of the hoof and the separation of the claws are intended to teach us that we must discriminate between our individual actions with a view to the practice of virtue. For the strength of our whole body and its activity depend upon our shoulders and limbs. Therefore he compels us to recognize that we must perform all our actions with discrimination according to the standard of righteousness -more especially because we have been distinctly separated from the rest of mankind. For most other men defile themselves by promiscuous intercourse, thereby working great iniquity,

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and whole countries and cities pride themselves upon such vices. For they not only have intercourse with men but they defile their own mothers and even their daughters. But we have been kept separate from such sins. And the people who have been separated in the aforementioned way are also characterized by the Lawgiver as possessing the gift of memory. For all animals " which are cloven-footed and chew the cud " represent to the initiated the symbol of memory. For the act of chewing the cud is nothing else than the reminiscence of life and existence. For life is wont to be sustained by means of food wherefore he exhorts us in the Scripture also in these words: ' Thou shalt surely remember the Lord that wrought in thee those great and wonderful things". For when they are properly conceived, they are manifestly great and glorious; first the construction of the body and the disposition of the food and the separation of each individual limb and, far more, the organization of the senses, the operation and invisible movement of the mind, the rapidity of its particular actions and its discovery of the arts, display an infinite resourcefulness. Wherefore he exhorts us to remember that the aforesaid parts are kept together by the divine power with consummate skill. For he has marked out every time and place that we may continually remember the God who rules and preserves (us). For in the matter of meats and drinks he bids us first of all offer part as a sacrifice and then forthwith enjoy our meal. Moreover, upon our garments he has given us a symbol of remembrance, and in like manner he has ordered us to put the divine oracles upon our gates and doors as a remembrance of God.

2. Philo, *Flaccus*, 46–47, 55

For no one country can contain the whole Jewish nation, by reason of its populousness; on which account they frequent all the most prosperous and fertile countries of Europe and Asia, whether islands or continents, looking indeed upon the holy city as their metropolis in which is erected the sacred temple of the most high God, but accounting those regions which have been occupied by their fathers, and grandfathers, and great grandfathers, and still more remote ancestors, in which they have been born and brought up, as their country; and there are even some regions to which they came the very moment that they were originally settled, sending a colony of their people to do a pleasure to the founders of the colony. And there was reason to fear lest all the populace in every country, taking what was done in Egypt as a model and as an excuse, might insult those Jews who were their fellow citizens, by introducing new regulations with respect to their synagogues and their national customs...

There are five districts in the city, named after the first five letters of the written alphabet, of these two are called the quarters of the Jews, because the chief portion of the Jews lives in them. There are also a few scattered Jews, but only a very few, living in some of the other districts. What then did they do? They drove the Jews entirely out of four quarters, and crammed them all into a very small portion of one; and by reason of their numbers they were dispersed over the sea-shore, and desert places, and among the tombs, being deprived of all their property; while the populace, overrunning their desolate houses, turned to plunder, and divided the booty among themselves as if they had obtained it in war. And as no one hindered them, they broke open even the workshops of the Jews, which were all shut up because of their mourning for Drusilla [the emperor's sister] and carried off all that they found there, and bore it openly through the middle of the market-place as if they had only been making use of their own property.

3. Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius*

Embassy to Gaius 20

The meeting-houses which they could not raze or burn out of existence, because so many Jews live massed together in the neighbourhood, they outraged in another way, thereby overthrowing our laws and customs. For they set up images of Gaius in them all and in the largest and most notable a bronze statue of a man mounted on a chariot and four. And so speedy and impetuous were they in their eagerness, that not having a new chariot of the kind at hand they fetched a very old one out of the gymnasium, a mass of rust with the ears, tails, feet and

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many other parts mutilated, and as some say dedicated to the honour of a woman, the original Cleopatra, great-grand-mother of the last queen of that name. What a serious charge this in itself entailed upon the dedicators is obvious to everyone. What does it matter if it was the new chariot of a woman? What if it was an old chariot of a man? As long as the general fact remains that it had been dedicated to someone else? Might not the authors of an offering of this kind in honour of the emperor reasonably feel alarm lest some information should be laid before one who always particularly insisted on his personal glorification? No doubt they had extravagant hopes of getting praise and reaping greater and more splendid benefits for turning our meeting-houses into new and additional precincts consecrated to him, though their motive was not to honour him but to take their fill in every way of the miseries of our nation. | We can find clear proofs of this. Take first the kings of Egypt. In three hundred years there was a succession of some ten or more of these, and none of them had any images or statues set up for them in our meeting-houses by the Alexandrians, although they were of the same race and kin as the people and were acknowledged, written and spoken of by them as gods. It was only natural that they who at any rate¹³⁹ were men should be so regarded by those who deified dogs and wolves and lions and crocodiles and many other wild animals on the land, in the water and the air, for whom altars and temples and shrines and sacred precincts have been established through the whole of Egypt.

Embassy to Gaius 23

How then did he show his approval? He was aware that the great section of Rome on the other side of the Tiber is occupied and inhabited by Jews, most of whom were Roman citizens emancipated. For having been brought as captives to Italy they were liberated by their owners and were not forced to violate any of their native institutions. He knew therefore that they have houses of prayer and meet together in them, particularly on the sacred sabbaths when they receive as a body a training in their ancestral philosophy. He knew too that they collect money for sacred purposes from their first-fruits and send them to Jerusalem by persons who would offer the sacrifices. Yet nevertheless he neither ejected them from Rome nor deprived them of their Roman citizenship because they were careful to preserve their Jewish citizenship also, nor took any violent measures against the houses of prayer, nor prevented them from meeting to receive instructions in the laws, nor opposed their offerings of the first-fruits. Indeed so religiously did he respect our interests that supported by wellnigh his whole household he adorned our temple through the costliness of his dedications, and ordered that for all time continuous sacrifices of whole burnt offerings should be carried out every day at his own expense as a tribute to the most high God.

Embassy to Gaius 370

It was owing to these considerations that we were able to hold up our heads for a while, but there were other circumstances which terrified us and kept us in great perplexity and distress to hear what the emperor would decide, and what he would pronounce, and what kind of sentence he would ultimately deliver; for he heard the general tenor of our arguments, though he disdained to attend to some of our facts. Surely it was a situation that the fate of all the Jews everywhere should rest precariously on us five envoys. For if he should decide in favour of our enemies, what other city will keep tranquil or refrain from attacking its fellow inhabitants, what house of prayer will be left unscathed, what kind of civic rights will not be upset for those whose lot is cast under the ancient institutions of the Jews? First upset, then shipwrecked, then sunk to the very bottom will be both their peculiar laws and the rights which they enjoy in common in every city. Waterlogged by such considerations we were dragged down and submerged in the depths, for those who hitherto seemed to be acting with us gave up.

4. Philo, *On the Confusion of Tongues*, 17.77–78

For this reason all the wise men mentioned in the books of Moses are represented as sojourners, for their souls are sent down from heaven upon earth as to a colony; and on account of their fondness for contemplation, and their love of learning, they are accustomed to migrate to the terrestrial nature. Since

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therefore having taken up their abode among bodies, they behold all the mortal objects of the outward senses by their means, they then subsequently return back from thence to the place from which they set out at first, looking upon the heavenly country in which they have the rights of citizens as their native land, and as the earthly abode in which they dwell for a while as in a foreign land. For to those who are sent to be the inhabitants of a colony, the country which has received them is in place of their original mother country; but still the land which has sent them forth remains to them as the house o which they desire to return.

5. Talmud Yerushalmi, *Sukkah* 5:1

It has been taught, R. Judah stated, He who has not seen the double colonnade of Alexandria in Egypt has never seen the glory of Israel. It was said that it was like a huge basilica, one colonnade within the other, and it sometimes held twice the number of people that went forth from Egypt. There were in it seventy-one cathedras of gold, corresponding to the seventy-one members of the Great Sanhedrin, not one of them containing less than twenty-one talents of gold, and a wooden platform in the middle upon which the attendant of the Synagogue stood with a scarf in his hand. When the time came to answer Amen, he waved his scarf and all the congregation duly responded. They moreover did not occupy their seats promiscuously, but goldsmiths sat separately, silversmiths separately, blacksmiths separately, metalworkers separately and weavers separately, so that when a poor man entered the place he recognized the members of his craft and on applying to that quarter obtained a livelihood for himself and for the members of his family. Abaye stated, Alexander of Macedon slew them all. Why were they so punished? — Because they transgressed this verse: Ye shall henceforth return no more that way, and they did return.

