

University of Groningen

Jews and Greeks

Ruiten, Jacques van

Published in:
Concilium

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
1995

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Ruiten, J. V. (1995). Jews and Greeks: The Diaspora as an Experience of Cultural Diversification. *Concilium*, 257, 14-23.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Jews and Greeks: The Diaspora as an Experience of Cultural Diversification

Jacques van Ruiten

In 333 BCE Alexander the Great began his conquest of the East. After the centuries-long domination of the scene by Eastern empires like Assyria (900–612), Babylon (612–539) and Persia (539–333), now for the first time the whole of the East came under a Western sphere of influence. This resulted in a dissemination of Greek culture and brought with it great changes in politics, religion and culture for the people living there. The cultural and economic foundations of this Greek world civilization, which is called Hellenism, also continued, albeit with some changes, through the whole period of Roman domination.

One special feature of the Hellenistic period in the historical framework of the Jewish people is the existence of a widespread Jewish Diaspora. Although this Diaspora had already come into being earlier, particularly in the Babylonian period, in the course of the Hellenistic period it spread vigorously, and Jews became established in all the lands around the Mediterranean Sea. They were attracted by the great prosperous Hellenistic centres of population for economic and cultural reasons. The conquests of Palestine by the Ptolemies and the Seleucids had resulted in many of them being carried off as prisoners or slaves. Finally, internal Jewish social and political tensions led to the flight of many Jews to Egypt. Round the beginning of our era, more Jews were living abroad than in Palestine, and often in regions which were under Hellenistic influence.

Many Jews vigorously opposed the influence of Hellenism on their culture, as is most evident from the Maccabean wars in the first half of the second century BCE. They tried to hold on to their own cultural and religious identity. But even Judaism succumbed to the influence of Hellenism, and this process took place not just in the Diaspora but also in

Palestine. Knowledge of the Greek language spread markedly among the Jews from the third century BCE on. Hellenistic forms of life (clothing, theatre-going and so on) were adopted, and Hellenistic forms of architecture came into their own. Knowledge of Greek literature, philosophy and religion also rapidly entered the Jewish sphere in Palestine and beyond.

In this article I shall concentrate on the question how Jewish literature in the early Hellenistic period reflects the cultural milieu in which it came into being. We shall first look at the Jewish writers who lived in Alexandria, paying attention above all to the historian Artapanus. Then we shall examine the situation in Palestine, where we shall be particularly occupied with the story of the treachery of the angels (I Enoch 6–11).

The Greek translation of the Torah

Alexandria above all exercised a great power of attraction on many Jews in the early Hellenistic period, not only because it was the greatest mercantile city but also because it was the centre of science and the arts. This city was the spiritual centre of the Hellenistic world. The very many Jews in this city who spoke Greek could not escape its influence. So they developed their own intellectual tradition, which was to last for centuries. By adopting Greek culture they tried to penetrate the privileged class of the Greeks and obtain equal status, while at the same time wanting to preserve their own Jewish identity.

The Greek translation of the Torah stood at the beginning of this tradition. The situation of Jews in Alexandria was such that already in the first half of the third century BCE many no longer knew Hebrew, so a need arose for a Greek translation of the Torah. The legend about the origin of this translation which has been preserved, for example, in the *Letter of Aristeas*, relates how seventy-two men, in silence and isolation, translated the Torah in seventy-two days. This translation has come to be known as the Septuagint (= Greek seventy) as a result. In the second and first century BCE the rest of the Hebrew Bible was then translated into Greek, part of it in Palestine.

The intention of the Septuagint is to render the Hebrew original as faithfully as possible. But at various places in this translation we come upon traces of Hellenistic thought-material. One could point to Genesis 1.2, where the Hebrew text reads 'the earth was desolate and empty'. The Septuagint translates here 'the earth was invisible and unordered'. This terminology is related to Greek philosophical ideas about the pre-existence of formless material, which has to be ordered by form, of the kind that we

find in Plato (*Timaeus* 51a). In Exodus 3.14 God identifies himself to Moses as 'I am who I am'. This is rendered by the translators of the Septuagint 'I am the One who is.' The accord with Greek philosophy consists in the fact that the divine is seen as Being *par excellence*, in other words the unchangeable as contrasted to the material world of coming to be and passing away. The Greek translation of Proverbs 8.22–31, the well-known passage about God's Wisdom, deviates markedly from the Hebrew original. Thus wisdom was created as the beginning of God's work. To the degree that she is present at creation, she guarantees the harmony of perfection and beauty. This notion of wisdom shows various agreements with the idea of the 'world soul' in Plato and later in the Stoa.

Alexandrian Jewish literature

The influence of Greek culture on Alexandrian Judaism is expressed not only in the Greek translation of the Bible but also in the writings of Jewish authors. Most of this literature has been lost, but from the fragments which have been preserved we can see that Jews wrote in various Greek literary genres. Thus the Jewish historian Demetrius wrote a chronological work *On the Kings of the Jews*, in the style of Greek scientific chronography of the end of the third century BCE, the purpose of which was to demonstrate the very great antiquity of the national Jewish tradition. He was followed in the second century by historians like Artapanus and Cleodemus Malchus. Greek epic poetry was written by poets like Philo the Elder, who composed his work in hexameters; the Samaritan Theodotus; and the author of the third book of the Sibylline oracles, while the playwright Ezekiel the Tragedian was capable of writing his work in iambic trimeters. They sketch what is certainly an apologetic picture of Jewish history, but at the same time do not reject the use of examples from Greek mythology. We find the first philosophical literature in Aristobulus. He combines Greek philosophical systems, above all those of Pythagoras, Plato and some of the Stoics, with Jewish traditions, above all the wisdom traditions as we find them in the books of Proverbs, Ben Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon. The climax of the Alexandrian Jewish tradition came with Philo of Alexandria (10 BCE – 40 CE). He saw himself as a Greek and a Jew at the same time. His synthesis between Greek philosophy, above all that of Plato, and the Jewish tradition, can be seen in his view of the logos as mediating between God and the world.

Artapanus

Here, by way of illustration, we shall investigate more closely one of these Jewish writers from Alexandria, the historian Artapanus, who lived in the second century BCE. Three fragments of his work have been preserved. These deal with the heroic acts of three forefathers of the Jewish people, namely Abraham, Joseph and Moses. The story that Artapanus sketches differs in various respects from the biblical text. Thus in the first fragment Abraham instructs the Egyptians in astrology, while in the second fragment Joseph voluntarily goes to Egypt and is immediately appointed governor there. There is no mention of any incident with Potiphar's wife and of his time in prison. Joseph is said to have been the first to have organized a just division of the land; and he is also said to have invented measures. The third fragment is extensive and is concerned with Moses. Great inventions are also attributed to him, like shipbuilding, machines for lifting heavy stones, the irrigation system, weapons and philosophy. In addition he divided the land into thirty-six districts and set over each district the deity whom it had to worship (cats, dogs, ibisis). These benefactions made Moses popular among the masses; the Egyptian priests showed him divine honours and he was called Hermes, i.e. Thoth, the Egyptian god of culture and science. According to Artapanus Moses (in Greek *Mooüsēs*) was called by the Greeks *Mooüisos*, the teacher of the mythical singer Orpheus. In Greek mythology the relationship between Orpheus and Musaeus is the other way round: Orpheus is the teacher of Musaeus. The reversal of the relationship by Artapanus contributes to the glorification of Moses. Moreover, in this way Moses is indirectly seen as the founder of Greek culture. According to tradition (Herodotus, Plato, Hecataeus), Orpheus is the one who brought culture and religion from Egypt to the Greeks.

Because Moses was so popular among the people, he incurred the hatred of Pharaoh, who sent him on a campaign against the Ethiopians. Here, however, Moses was unexpectedly successful. After that Moses killed a man who was sent to murder him and fled to Arabia. He later returned to Egypt to bring about the liberation of the Hebrews. Then he ended up in prison, but the doors opened of their own accord, after which Moses entered the palace. The king was disconcerted by this and thereupon asked Moses to tell him the name of his God. The rest of the story, finally, describes the plagues and the exodus through the Red Sea and remains quite close to the biblical text.

The reason why Artapanus' work diverges so markedly from the biblical story must be sought in the fact that like the other Hellenistic Jewish

writers he was strongly influenced by the anti-Jewish historiography of Egyptian authors, of whom Manetho from the third century BCE is the best known. These practised the literary genre of 'rival' historiography. In this genre the superiority of one's own people and religion was emphasized. So it was that Manetho increased the glory of Egypt by belittling the Jews and telling negative stories about their origin. The early Jewish authors did not defend themselves directly, but tried to defeat their opponents with their own weapons namely by making use of the same literary genre of rival historiography, with the aim of emphasizing the superiority of Moses, and thus of the Jewish people and their religion. These inventions, which were of great cultural importance in the Hellenistic period and were attributed to legendary heroes, are now attributed to the Jewish forefathers Abraham, Joseph and above all Moses. In this way they in fact became Jewish inventions. Moreover many cultures, including Greek culture, were made dependent on Moses. Various themes in Artapanus's work (for example the initiation of animal worship and Moses' Ethiopian campaign) run parallel to themes from the work of Manetho and seem intended as implicit refutations of it.

There are further Hellenistic motifs in the work of Artapanus which also appear in connection with the Dionysus and which could indicate that Artapanus was writing against the cult of Dionysus in Alexandria, in which Jews, too, were forced to take part (cf. III Macc. 2.29–31). Here I would refer simply to the motif of the prison door opening by itself. The god Dionysus is also freed in this way. This motif of the miraculous freeing of the hero recurs many times in ancient literature and has also found its way into the New Testament (cf. Acts 5.17–25; 12.6–17), but it does not occur elsewhere in Jewish literature.

It has been pointed out that Artapanus, like other early Jewish Hellenistic historians, pays no attention to the Torah as a law book. For early Hellenistic Judaism Moses is the wise man, the inventor and the great leader, but not the lawgiver. This could mean that part of early Hellenistic Judaism thought of its identity not in terms of the law, like later rabbinic Judaism, but in stories about its forefathers in which they proved to be superior to the Greek and Egyptian heroes. That in this defence of ancestral traditions writers sometimes went against these traditions, as in the description of Abraham as the inventor of astrology and of Moses as the founder of Egyptian animal worship, and moreover made use of Hellenistic traditions, is characteristic of the new cultural situation in which Judaism moved.

Palestine

In the post-exilic period Palestinian Judaism produced a rich and many-sided literature. This reflects the many-sidedness of Judaism in the early Hellenistic period. Here we must realize that virtually none of the literature of the pro-Hellenistic minority of Palestine has survived the course of events associated with the Maccabean revolt. To what degree Hellenistic influence has determined the composition and redaction of the Old Testament writings is disputed, but it certainly cannot be excluded in the late wisdom literature, like Proverbs 1-9. The apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature often makes use of literary forms which also occur in the Greek language sphere, like historiography (e.g. I Maccabees, Jubilees, the Genesis Apocryphon), letters (e.g. the Letter of Jeremiah and the Apocalypse of Baruch) and romanticized narratives (e.g. Tobit and Judith), but the agreements with literary forms from their own Jewish tradition are so great that it is difficult to speak of a demonstrable Hellenistic influence.

That does not detract from the fact that in Palestine, too, early in the Hellenistic period, in reflection on their own Jewish tradition, authors at the same time made use of elements from Hellenistic traditions. Early witnesses to this are Pseudo-Eupolemus, an anonymous Samaritan historian, and Eupolemus, the member of a leading priestly family and a supporter of the Maccabaeae policy. Both wrote in Greek in the first half of the second century BCE, and both show various agreements with Artapanus, who was discussed earlier. They are very free over the biblical texts, which they adapt at will in an attempt to make the biblical tradition correspond with non-Jewish historiography. To this end they refer back to Greek writers, who were evidently being read in Palestine. In an attempt to strengthen their own self-awareness, important cultural inventions are attributed to their own forefathers. Enoch was the inventor of astrology, in which Abraham then instructed the other peoples. Moses is the inventor of writing, as a result of which the Torah became the oldest of all books. Here finally the whole of Hellenism could be made dependent on Moses.

The treachery of the angels (I Enoch 6-11)

It is striking that Hellenistic influence can also be demonstrated in literature which came into being in the circle of Hasidim (the 'pious'), who were strictly opposed to Hellenism. One example of this is the story of the treachery of the angels in I Enoch 6-11, which probably comes from the first half of the second century BCE. The story is on the one hand rooted in

biblical tradition, but on the other makes use of mythological material from the Hellenistic world to direct it against the Hellenistic overlords.

Central to the story of I Enoch 6–11 is the lament over a world which is full of injustice and corruption. This evil is attributed to the treachery of the angels. They are responsible for the violence of the giants, whom they aroused by doing violence to the daughters of men; for the fabrication of weapons of war, for unchastity; and for the spread of secret divine knowledge like magic and soothsaying among the human race. The rebellious angels finally suffered divine judgment.

The story of I Enoch 6–11 comprises the oldest and at the same time the most thorough reworking of Gen. 6.1–4 in the post-biblical literature. Thus Genesis 6.1–2 is taken over completely: ‘In those days, when the children of man had multiplied, it happened that there were born unto them handsome and beautiful daughters. And the angels, the children of heaven, saw them and desired them; and they said to one another, “Come, let us choose wives for ourselves from among the daughters of men and beget us children”’ (I Enoch 6.1–2). The text of Gen. 6.4 is also recognizable with a few changes: ‘And they took wives unto themselves, and everyone (respectively) chose one woman for himself, and they began to go unto them And the women became pregnant and gave birth to great giants’ (I Enoch 7.1–2). The author of I Enoch does not include a number of phrases from Gen. 6.4 (‘and also afterward’, ‘of old’, ‘men of renown’), and he identifies the ‘men of renown’ with the ‘giants’. The way in which he takes over large parts of Gen. 6.1–4 almost literally gives the impression that he has taken over an old Jewish tradition and is developing it further.

However, careful study of the text shows that the small changes that the author makes in his rendering of Gen. 6.4 have important consequences. Thus the identification of ‘men of renown’ with ‘giants’ reverses the intention of the Genesis story. Genesis 6.4 describes how from a voluntary union of the gods with human women men of renown (who are seen in a positive light) emerge to fight with the giants, who were already on earth. By contrast, in I Enoch it is said that no men of renown emerged from these unions, which are now seen negatively, but ‘giants’. The giants are negative figures who are present only to the detriment of human beings and even destroy them.

Strikingly enough, the anti-Hellenistic author of I Enoch 6–11 combines the ‘transformed’ text of Gen. 6.1–4 with a Hellenistic tradition which reports the betrayal of heavenly secrets to human beings. This tradition is known as the Prometheus saga, fragments of which have been preserved in the works of the Greek authors Hesiod and Aeschylus.

Prometheus is wise and intelligent and uses his wisdom to help human beings. However, by doing this he rebels against Zeus, for which he is punished. Moreover his beneficence to humankind ultimately proves to be the fundamental source of evil in the world. According to the story all human skills come from Prometheus. Its best-known feature is that Prometheus steals fire and gives this to human beings, but he also instructs them in woodworking, housebuilding, the rising of stars and their positions, numbers and letters, the taming of animals, medicines and the interpretation of dreams and the flight of birds. As punishment for his rebellion against Zeus Prometheus is sent into the wilderness, where he is chained hand and foot. When he continues his accusations against the supreme god, Zeus makes the rock open and Prometheus is swallowed up until a later time, when he will be subjected to a horrifying torture.

The author of I Enoch 6–11 does not take over the story of the Prometheus saga literally. But his text shows so many points of sometimes unique correspondence with this saga that dependence on it must be thought to be very probable. As in the Prometheus saga, in I Enoch 6–11 a heavenly being (Azael) rebels against God by teaching and revealing certain things to human beings. The focusing of these revealed things on the mining and working of metals intensifies the parallelism with Prometheus's theft of fire, because fire is essential for working metals. For this rebellious act, like Prometheus, he is bound hand and foot and cast into the wilderness. Like the Prometheus saga, I Enoch reports that the earth opens and swallows up the main figure until a later time, when punishment will be inflicted.

In I Enoch the instruction in metalworking ends up with the manufacture of jewels, which make women seductive. Then the women seduce the angel Shemyaz and his helpers. This is the beginning of all evil. In the Prometheus saga, after Prometheus has instructed human beings, Zeus sends an attractive and seductive woman (Pandora), who is bedecked with gold and ornaments, bearing a box full of gifts and evils. When she opens this, the evils fly out over humankind.

Scholars have pointed out a hidden allusion in I Enoch to one of the works of Hesiod, his *Works and Days*. The Prometheus myth has been preserved in this work. In I Enoch 12.2 Enoch says: 'And his works were with the watchers/ and with the holy ones were his days.' The pairing of works and days is strange in synonymous parallelism, and does not occur elsewhere in the Bible or related literature. In connection with the title of Hesiod's work it could indicate a direct dependence of I Enoch on this work.

I could go on to point out other Greek myths which are reflected in the

story of I Enoch 6–11. However, this reference to the Prometheus myth has shown that already in an early phase of the history of Hellenism there was a thorough knowledge of Greek mythology, even in Palestine. Thus even traditional Jewish literature already reflects at an early period the Hellenistic milieu in which it came into being.

Conclusion

The central question posed by this article was how Jewish literature from the early Hellenistic period reflects the cultural milieu in which it came into being. I have demonstrated that Judaism in this period was many-sided. There were divergent trends, each of which reacted in its own way to the new social and cultural reality. They extended from an eager embrace of Hellenistic culture to total opposition to it. The literary evidence from this period proves on the one hand to be powerfully opposed to the influence of Hellenism on Jewish culture (for example the author of I Enoch 6–11) and at the same time to be deeply influenced by it. On the other hand, the evidence shows that even those who were positive towards the new culture wanted to maintain their Jewish identity and that in their own way they remained faithful to the Jewish tradition. I pointed out in my discussion of the historiographer Artapanus that holding on to one's own tradition sometimes means going against this same tradition in a creative way. So different forms of new Jewish identity came into being in this period. Finally, we can see that the Jewish biblical tradition was evidently strong enough in the early Hellenistic period to cope with the new cultural situation. At the same time it shows an openness which made it possible for new and sometimes strong influences from outside to renew it without really threatening the ongoing existence of Judaism.

Translated by John Bowden

Select Bibliography

R. Bartelmus, *Heroentum in Israel und seiner Umwelt*, Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments 65, Zurich 1979.

J. H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha II*, New York and London 1985.

Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum, Assen 1974ff. (a multi-volume series).

M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, London and Philadelphia 1974.

P. W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs. An Introductory Survey of a Millennium of Jewish Funerary Epigraphy (300 BCE to 700 CE)*, Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 2, Kampen 1991.

—, *Studies over het jodendom in de oudheid*, Kampen 1992.

E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC–AD 135). A New English Version Revised and Edited by Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar*, I–III, Edinburgh 1973–1987.

S. Talmon (ed.), *Jewish Civilization in the Hellenistic-Roman Period*, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha, Supplement Series 10, Sheffield 1991.

G. Veltri, *Eine Tora für den König Talmai*, Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 41, Tübingen 1994.

N. Walter, *Artapanos*, Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit I/2, Gütersloh 1976.