

***Old Testament History***  
by  
**Charles F. Pfeiffer**

**Part Eight**  
**Between the Testaments:**  
**The Hellenistic Period**

**CHAPTER 88**

***The Impact of Hellenism on the Jews***

Alexander the Great had been a missionary as well as a conqueror. From his teacher Aristotle he had been taught the virtues of Greek philosophy and the Greek "way of life." Although his journeys toward the east caused him to adopt non-Greek practices, and a Greek purist would be shocked at his assumption of the role of a deity, Alexander continued to think of himself as one who was bringing the blessings of Hellenism, as the Greek way of life is called, to more benighted parts of the world. Alexander had attempted to establish a model Hellenistic community in each of the lands he had conquered. Alexandria in Egypt is the best known and most successful of these planned communities. Alexander was sure that the excellences which these communities represented would have the effect of making Hellenism attractive to the countries in which they were located.

Although the empire of Alexander was short lived, being divided shortly after his death, his cultural accomplishments were of much longer duration. In the years following Alexander's death, Palestine was subject successively to the Egyptian Ptolemies and the Syrian Seleucids, but in each case the culture was Hellenistic. Although military rivals, culturally the states which emerged from the empire of Alexander were one. The city-states of mainland Greece became stagnant during the three pre-Christian centuries, but Hellenistic centers such as Alexandria, Pergamum, and Dura became centers of cultural activity.

The Hellenistic city could readily be identified. Fine public buildings were erected. A gymnasium was built for that culture of the body which the Greeks always stressed. An open air theater was built to entertain the populace. Greek dress was observed in the city, with people speaking the Greek language and subscribing to one of the schools of Greek philosophy. The city government was modeled along the lines of the Greek city-states.

Hellenism was not all bad, or all good. It did, however, present a challenge to Judaism both in the "dispersion" and in Palestine proper. Norman Bentwich observes, "The interaction of Judaism and Hellenistic culture is . . . one of the fundamental struggles in the march of

civilization . . ."<sup>1</sup> If the great temptation to Pre-Exilic Israel was the idolatry of its Canaanite neighbors, the great temptation of Post-Exilic Judaism was Hellenistic attitudes toward life.

## 1. Hellenism in the Dispersion

### General Influence

At no time after the Babylonian Exile did the majority of Jews live in Palestine. Many remained in their settlements in Babylon, or settled in other parts of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. Others went to Syria where there were large Jewish settlements, particularly in Antioch and Damascus. Asia Minor had large Jewish communities. Lydia, Phrygia, Ephesus, Pergamum, and Sardis all had numerous Jews in their population. The account of the visitors to Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and the journeys of the apostle Paul give us a significant picture of the settlements of the Jews of the dispersion. These Jews remained loyal to the Jerusalem Temple. Every male Israelite over the age of twenty was expected to pay his Temple dues, and pilgrimages were made whenever possible. Each settlement, however, took on something of the characteristics of its neighbors, so that the Jews of Babylon would not have the same attitudes as those of Egypt. Those of Palestine would be apt to consider themselves alone the truly orthodox.

The most significant group of Jews of the dispersion, historically speaking, was that of Alexandria. From the initial settlement of Alexandria the Jews had formed one of the most important and largest segments of the city. Here was the temptation to assimilate to the prevailing Hellenistic pattern, and here also was the determination to remain true to the faith. A third century B.C. writer, Hecataeus of Abdera, wrote, "In recent times under the foreign rule of the Persians, and then of the Macedonians by whom the Persian Empire was overthrown, intercourse with other races has led to many of the traditional Jewish ordinances losing their hold."<sup>2</sup>

The nature of the temptation which beset the Jews in the midst of Hellenism may be noted from the writings of the ancient historian Posidonius:

The people of these cities are relieved by the fertility of their soil from a laborious struggle for existence. Life is a continuous series of social festivities. Their gymnasiums they use as baths where they anoint themselves with costly oils and myrrhs. In the *grammateia* (such is the name they give to the public eating-halls) they practically live, filling themselves there for the better part of the day with rich foods and wine; much that they cannot eat they carry away home. They feast to the prevailing music of strings. The cities are filled from end to end with the noise of

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1 Norman Bentwich, *Hellenism*, p. 11.

2 E. R. Bevan, *Jerusalem Under the High Priests*, p. 43.

harp-playing.<sup>3</sup>

Even for those who might not be tempted by such a prospect of a life of ease, there were other aspects of Hellenism that seemed to offer a fuller life than the older ways. The merchant class was able to amass great wealth which could purchase better housing and food than the pre-Hellenistic world could have imagined. Great libraries in Alexandria and other Hellenistic centers, together with schools emphasizing a Greek education, would appeal to many of the nobler youths of Israel. Sculpture and the fine arts offered an aesthetic outlook which would be frowned upon by the orthodox, but which would make an impact on the young in particular. In Alexandria a synthesis developed between Judaism and Hellenism.

### The Septuagint

The greatest monument of Alexandrian Judaism was, without question, the translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek vernacular. While the origin of this version is unknown, legend places the beginning of this translation in the reign of the first of the Ptolemies (Philadelphus). While the legends suggest that the work was done in order to provide a copy of the Hebrew Scriptures for the Alexandrian library, it is more likely that the translation was made at the impulse of Alexandrian Jews who wanted their Greek-speaking children to be able to read the Scriptures. As the mother tongue (Hebrew) was forgotten by the younger generation, some provision had to be made for the preservation of the Hebrew sacred literature in the popularly spoken Greek. The Torah, or Pentateuch, was translated sometime around 250 B.C. The remainder of the canonical books of the Old Testament were subsequently translated, as were the apocryphal books. By the time of Origen (third century A.D.) this entire collection was called "the Septuagint," although the term originally referred only to the Greek translation of the Pentateuch. That a copy found its way into the library need not be doubted.

Around 100 B.C. a letter known as the *Letter of Aristeas* was written to describe the way in which the Septuagint was produced. This letter purports to have been written by an official in the court of Ptolemy Philadelphus of Egypt (285-246 B.C.). Philadelphus was an enlightened ruler who distinguished himself as a patron of the arts. Under him the great library of Alexandria, one of the cultural wonders of the world for almost a millennium, was inaugurated. It was for Ptolemy Philadelphus that Manetho compiled his great history of Egypt which divided the history of Egypt into thirty dynasties. Although inaccurate in many places, Manetho's divisions are still used today.

According to the *Letter of Aristeas*, Demetrius of Phalerum, said to have been Ptolemy's librarian, aroused the king's interest in the Jewish Law. At his suggestion, Ptolemy sent a delegation to the High Priest, Eleazar, in Jerusalem, who chose six elders from each of the

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3 *Ibid.* p. 43 f.

twelve tribes to translate the Law into Greek. These seventy-two elders, with a specially accurate and beautiful copy of the Law, were sent to Alexandria where they proved their fitness for their important task. They were sent to the island of Pharos, famed for its lighthouse, where, according to the Letter of Aristeas, in seven-two days they completed their translation work and presented a version which they all agreed upon. The story was later embellished with the idea that the seventh-two were sent into individual cells, each translating the whole Law, all versions agreeing exactly when compared with one another after seventy-two days!

There can be no doubt that the legends which have been advanced concerning the origin of the Septuagint were designed to prove that it was an inspired and authoritative translation. When Jerome went behind the Septuagint to the Hebrew Old Testament, he was censured by many of his contemporaries who looked upon the Septuagint as the official Bible of the church in the fourth century.

Although the legends contained in the *Letter of Aristeas* cannot be believed, they do reflect a belief that the Law was translated into Greek during the time of Philadelphus. There is evidence that this is correct. Quotations from the Septuagint text of Genesis and Exodus appear in Greek literature before 200 B.C. The language of the Septuagint, however, suggests that it was made by Egyptian Jews rather than Jerusalemite elders. The story contained in the *Letter of Aristeas* evidently had a specific propaganda purpose. As numerous translations appeared, there was a desire to make one superior version definitive. If it could be proved that the Septuagint had been inspired in the same sense as the Hebrew originals, then the Greek-speaking Jew would have an infallible authority comparable to that of his Palestinian brother.

Although without question translated by Alexandrian Jews for their own use, the Septuagint did serve as a means of acquainting the non-Jew with the principles of Jewish faith and practice. No doubt a copy was placed in the famous Alexandrian library. When we come to New Testament times, we read of many "God-fearers" among the gentiles. In a real sense the Septuagint helped to pave the way for the ministry of the apostle Paul and others who took the message of Christ to non-Jew as well as to Jew. The biblical preaching in the Greek-speaking world was based on the Septuagint text. Many of the New Testament quotations from the Old are taken from the Septuagint, although others are translated from the Hebrew and others do not accord perfectly with either the Hebrew or Greek texts which we know. In most, if not all, of these cases the writers are apparently paraphrasing the Scripture which they assume to be known to their readers.

#### Alexandrian Allegorism

With no intention to abandon their ancestral faith, Alexandrian Jews followed their gentile neighbors in subscribing to a school of Greek philosophy. This resulted in that attempt to harmonize Scripture with Greek thinking which produced the allegorical method of

interpreting Scripture. Aristobulus and Philo were the great allegorizers. To them the literal meaning of the Bible was vulgar, misleading, and insufficient. A hidden, deeper meaning must be sought. By reading into the Bible their pagan philosophy, they were able to consider themselves enlightened Hellenists and orthodox Hebrews at one and the same time. Some of them adopted Greek names to help in the process of assimilation.

The allegorist regards the literal sense of Scripture as the vehicle for a secondary sense which is regarded as more spiritual and profound. The method is associated with the name of Origen, one of the early Church Fathers. As a method of Biblical interpretation it is rejected by careful scholars, but vestiges of it do appear in the extreme typology which is still prevalent in some circles.

Allegorism is of Greek origin. With the development of a philosophical and historical tradition which appealed to the thinking man, a serious problem was raised. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Hesiod's *Theogony* contained ideas which the sophisticated Greek could no longer seriously accept. Yet these writings were cultural and religious classics. Was there no way in which they might be preserved?

The Stoics produced a solution. The stories of the gods, their lust and jealousy, their drunkenness and revelry, should not be accepted as historical truth. These stories really illustrated the struggle among the virtues. Zeus became the Logos ("Word" or "Idea"). Hermes represented Reason. Once such a "key" was developed to explain the "real" meaning of the classical epics, the Greek felt secure both in his ancient epic-religious heritage and his modern philosophical-historical attitude. Through allegorical interpretation the Alexandrian Greeks preserved their religious literature from oblivion by making it mean what it certainly was never intended to mean.

The Alexandrian Jew took a lesson from his Greek neighbor. As a loyal Jew he looked upon his Bible as the Word of God. He loved his Jewish faith with its religious observances and emphasis on the faithfulness of God and His call to Abraham and his descendants. Yet the Alexandrian Jew was more than a son of Abraham. He was also an heir to the culture of Greece as that culture had been spread abroad by Alexander. There was much in Hellenism that he esteemed. The Alexandrian Jew wanted to be a child of his times as much as the Alexandrian Greek did, and he used similar means.

Convinced that he could be a faithful Jew and a consistent Hellenist, the Alexandrian decided to accept a Greek philosophy and apply the allegorical method to bring harmony between the two. About 160 B.C. an Alexandrian Jew named Aristobulus taught that the Greek philosophers had actually borrowed much of their thought from the Mosaic Law. To Aristobulus, Moses and the prophets presented the same truths as those enunciated by the great Greek philosophers.

The most famous name in Jewish allegorical thought is Philo, the son of a wealthy

Alexandrian merchant, who lived from about 20 B.C. to about A.D. 50. A man of great erudition, Philo mentions sixty-four Greek writers, including Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Solon, the tragedians, and Plato. To Philo, these Greeks were not heathen. They were men of God, on a par with Israel's prophets. From Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, Philo was able to weave for himself a philosophical system. Moses was looked upon as the greatest thinker of all. The lesser sages had all learned from him, and all truth could be found in the Law of Moses. Philo recognized that this was not always apparent in the letter. Under the letter of the Law, however, it could be found by using allegorical interpretation.

Philo regarded himself as a thoroughly orthodox Jew. He may not have known the Hebrew language at all, but he accepted the Greek Septuagint Version as a mechanically inspired volume. In his Septuagint he determined to find the "true" or allegorical sense. The literal sense might be tame, or even absurd, but the "true" sense could be learned by applying certain basic principles.

Allegorical interpretation is thoroughly subjective. If the literal sense of Scripture suggested something which the interpreter deemed unworthy of God, he considered this sufficient warrant to seek a "hidden" allegorical meaning. Anything deemed impossible or contrary to reason was allegorized. Anthropomorphism was offensive to the Greek mentality, so all references to God which imply human characteristics were eliminated by means of the allegorical concept. Abraham's journey to Palestine is made to be the story of a Stoic philosopher who leaves Chaldea (sensual understanding) and stops for a time at Haran ("holes" or "the sense"). Abraham's marriage to Sarah is the marriage of the philosopher to "abstract wisdom."

Considerable attention was paid to the form of Scripture. Any repetition in Scripture was interpreted as pointing to something new. If one of several possible synonymous words was chosen in a passage of Scripture, this pointed to some special meaning. A word in the Septuagint might be interpreted according to every shade of meaning it bore in Greek. By slightly altering the letters, still other meanings might be derived.

From the Jewish allegorists, the Christian church adopted a method of Biblical interpretation which has persisted in some places to the present. From the time of Origen it dominated the thinking of the Roman church. In antiquity there were notable exceptions, however, The Syrian school of Antioch, including such writers as Theodore of Mopsuestia, insisted on a literal interpretation of Scripture. Syria was removed from the influence of Alexandria, and showed a feeling for the true nature of Scripture, as over against allegorizing tendencies. The Reformation brought a renewed emphasis on the literal, historical interpretation of Scripture.

## Summary

From the Christian point of view the Judaism of the dispersion served an important function. The translation of the Bible into Greek provided the church with a mighty weapon in its first contacts with the Greek-speaking gentile world. The Jewish communities were centers from which the gospel could be preached, during the lifetime of the apostle Paul, throughout the empire. The attempt to interpret Scripture allegorically and to form a synthesis between Biblical revelation and Greek speculative thought proved a snare to the early church. Under Origen, allegorical interpretation became the norm of Biblical study and remained such, with notable exceptions, until the Reformation in the sixteenth century.

## 2. Hellenism in Palestine

Palestine itself was not so far removed from the centers of Hellenism as to be untouched. Especially the educated classes were enamored with the Greek way of doing things. The amphitheater and the gymnasium were attractive to the young, and a strong Hellenistic party emerged.

In Judea, however, the lines were more closely drawn than they were in the dispersion. An anti-Hellenistic party arose which considered the Greek manner of life a threat to Judaism. The emphasis on things material, the nude appearance of athletes in the gymnasium, the neglect of Jewish rites, were regarded as evidence of defection from the law of God. The Hasidim, or "the pious," were ready to defend their ancestral faith to the death if need be, and in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes many of them did die for that faith. Future history shows us how necessary the Hasidim were for maintaining the place of the Law of the Lord in a day of moral and spiritual decay. A generation that was tempted to accept the worst aspects of Hellenistic life needed the corrective of a vibrant Hasidism.