Aristeas the Tourist

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1. According to James Redfield in an oft-quoted article published in 1985, Herodotus is neither a historian nor an ethnographer *avant la lettre*, but a “tourist,” that is, a “wondering stranger,” one who “goes abroad to see people different from himself,” and wonders that they are different. The “tourist,” writes James Redfield, “travels in order to be a foreigner, which is to say, he travels in order to come home. He discovers his own culture by taking it with him to places where it is out of place, discovers its specific contours by taking it to places where it does not fit. Tourism is thus both a proof and a source of cultural morale … The tourist comes home with a new knowledge that he is at home, with a new appreciation of the only place where he is not a foreigner.” Taking his readers from Egypt to Persia, and from Persia to Scythia, Herodotus never speaks of anything but the Greeks. The point of the detour is precisely to return home; in other words, to define “home” by way of a detour.2

Greeks travel. Odysseus, we are reminded, “saw the cities of many men and learned their mind” (*Od*. I 3). In their many travels, some real, some imaginary, Greek tourists, from Odysseus to Apollonius of Tyana, describe and compare the nature, people and customs they observe, both to enhance their notion of the familiar, and to question it. “Tourism,” the experience the Greeks called *theôria*—traveling to see, traveling to know—defines the centre in contrast to the far, the foreign, the exotic, and allows us to see it anew, to question our own norms and institutions, and to suggest they too could be different, other, or that they are, as a matter of fact, exotic to others.3 Thus Herodotus’s remarks concerning the madness of the Persian king Cambyses, and his mocking of Egyptian customs, following which he reports a rather noteworthy anecdote—a tale which inspired Montaigne to proclaim: “Everyone calls barbarism what is not of his usage.” Herodotus relates how another Persian king, Darius, engaged in a cultural experiment of sorts. He first asked the Greeks at his court whether they would agree to eat their dead. Then, he asked the so-called Indian Callatiae—who apparently ate their dead—if they, on the contrary, could imagine burning them (as the Greeks do). Both Greeks and Indians were properly horrified by Darius’s proposal, leading Herodotus to conclude, quoting Pindar, that indeed “*nomos* is king of all.” Indeed, in every place the custom rules.4 By contrasting the Greek funerary rites to the Callatiae’s custom of eating their dead, Herodotus turned a Persian story into an interrogation of Greek rituals, and fundamentally decentred (one may say *estranged*) Greek conventions and norms.5

Going abroad is one way of decentring one’s perspective. Another way is to have the foreigner visit. Thus, for instance, Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, first published 1721. Montesquieu pretended to provide his reader with the

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original letters of two Persian aristocrats visiting Paris and exchanging their impressions of European customs. In the ingenuous eye of the foreign observer, unimpaired by familiarity, everything is surprising, even astonishing. 18th century French society, its social, cultural, and religious inconsistencies, is naively, yet severely examined by Montesquieu’s alien visitors. What is the Pope, they ask, but “an idol incensed out of an old habit?” Montesquieu’s Persian mask therefore shifts the responsibility for his irreverent opinions on his would-be “tourists.” By describing “home” as if seen from the outside and for the first time, one demystifies the self-evidence of the norms and institutions of their own culture and society.6

Contrary to Montesquieu, Herodotus doesn’t mask his voice. His Greek posture is explicit. Yet he sometimes also allows the “other” to voice their perspective, thus staging an alien discourse with regard to things Greek. Take for instance the Egyptians priests, who present him with an original version of the abduction of Helen.7 Interrogating these legendary sages, Herodotus learns (or rather, allows his readers to learn) that Helen had in fact never left Egypt, where Menelaus would find her after a decade of inane fighting at the walls of Troy. Hence, Herodotus seems to suggest, wasn’t the whole story of Europe and Asia’s confrontation, from the Trojan War down to Herodotus’s time, nothing but a huge mistake?8

2. In what follows, I will turn to the so-called Letter of Aristeas as a prime example of ventriloquist literature in Antiquity. This Jewish-Hellenistic text, famous for its account of how the Jewish Law was originally translated into Greek in the early Ptolemaic period, is also a wonderful pseudo-ethnographic narrative, claiming to describe the Jews from the perspective of a typical Greek “tourist.”

The Letter of Aristeas is not a letter, nor was it written by anyone called “Aristeas” (nor by any “Pseudo-Aristeas” for that matter).9 It is the purported account of a Greek courtier traveling to Judea on behalf of the Egyptian King Ptolemy Philadelphus, and escorting back to Alexandria a cohort of Jewish sages entrusted with the Greek translation of the Jewish Law. If the precise dating of the text remains a controversial matter, the arguments for the Jewish identity of its author have been well rehearsed since the early 18th century.10 Although claiming to be a historical account, the Letter of Aristeas is a work of fiction, most probably written by an Alexandrian Jew in the mid-2nd century BCE.11 The perspective it claims to offer, however, is that of non-Jewish court official, “Aristeas,”

7 Hdt. II 113-20.
11 E. J. BICKERMAN, “Zur Datierung des Pseudo-Aristeas,” ZNW 29 (1930) 280-98 (=E. J. BICKERMAN, “The Dating of Pseudo-Aristeas,” in Studies in Jewish and Christian History. A New Edition in English including The God of the Maccabees, 2 vols., Leiden/(Boston 2007, vol. 1: 108-133) sought to demonstrate that the work could not have been written before 150 BCE. His arguments have often been contested, yet the only scholarly consensus seems to be that the text was written “some time” in the 2nd century BCE. See J. M. G. BARCLAY, Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE - 117 CE), Edinburgh 1996: 445; J. J. COLLINS, Between
writing out for the use of his brother, “Philocrates,” the record of his voyage to Judea as well as his impressions of the Jews.

I here wish to take seriously the author’s claim to provide his readers with an external testimony on the Jews, and to consider the ways in which he constructs an image of the Jews as mediated through this external perspective. Indeed, this subtle construction of a foreigner’s eye allows the author to adopt a twice-distantiated outlook, vis-à-vis both Greeks and Jews, embedding different levels of discourse in his narrative. Through an elaborate ethnographic fiction, the author can describe the Jews as if they were truly an alien culture, and mould them into an imaginary entity; imaginary Jews resembling Herodotus’s wise Egyptian priests and who, like the latter, can also confront their Greek interlocutor with a “Barbarian” discourse on the Greeks.

3. Let me start with Aristeas’s encounter with the Jewish high priest, Eleazar, in Jerusalem. This encounter provides our author with the opportunity to develop a lengthy speech on the Jewish Law, in fact an early example of allegorical interpretation of the biblical commandments. The Mosaic legislation, expounds Eleazar, has been thoroughly planned in view of leading the people it addresses to their moral perfecting and to the practice of justice. The commandments contained within the Law are “signs,” or “symbols,” whose interest does not lie in their literal meaning. Each of these commandments possesses a more profound significance (logon bathun), accessible to men of intelligence. Consider the dietary regulations. In regard to natural or physical reason, all creatures proceed from a common origin. The legislator, however, distinguished among the animals those that are to be considered impure from those that are to be considered pure. Impure animals are, for instance, wild and carnivorous birds who use their strength to oppress other species and devour them, at the expense of all justice. The tame fowl, on the contrary, who are declared edible, distinguish themselves by eating “grains, and vegetables, all very pure things, and refrain from doing violence to their kindred.” It is according to their example that one is to lead his life, without oppressing his kindred or pride himself on his strength. In Eleazar’s words: “By such examples, then, the lawgiver has commanded to men of understanding a symbol that they must be just and achieve nothing by violence, nor, confiding in their own strength, must they oppress others.” The dietary prescriptions, which—as underlined by Aristeas—have intrigued so many people, thus pertain to justice and to the exercise of justice in social context. No part of the Law was established randomly; and most of its commandments aim at encouraging the Jews to be righteous in all their actions, and to be mindful at all times of the omnipotence and solicitude of God.

But the Law also allows the Jews to be protected from any nefarious influence that could distract them from this ideal goal. It is a well-known fact, says Eleazar, that the company of wise and intelligent people encourages individuals to improve their way of life, whereas the company of wicked individuals is corruptive. Yet “all other men except ourselves,” points out Eleazar, “believe that there are many gods” (pollous theous einai nomizousin). They make powerless images of those who discoverer things useful to man, and bow in front them.

_Athen and Jerusalem. Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora_, Grand Rapids MI 2000: 98-100. On the Letter of Aristeas as historiographical fiction, see Honigman, _op. cit._ (n. 9).

12 _Ad Phil._ 128-71.


14 _Ad Phil._ 148.

15 _Ad Phil._ 134-5.
Even worse are the Egyptians and similar “infatuated people” (polumataioi), who worship wild beasts, be they dead or alive, to which they offer sacrifices. Therefore, and to preserve the Jews from such vain opinions, the legislator encircled them with “impregnable palisades and walls of iron.” Everything among the Jews has been painstakingly codified in view of protecting them from any corrupting contact with unworthy people. The Jewish Law thus sets the Jews “apart from all men.” And while the latter defile themselves through unnatural intercourse and incestuous practices, the Jews remain free of such vices. It is only reasonable then, that the Egyptian priests themselves should consider as “godly people” (anthrôpoi theou) these men (the Jews) who have no interest in luxury, in drink or food, but devote their lives to the study of the true divinity.

The high priest’s speech could easily lead us to believe that the author of the Letter endorses a dichotomous worldview: on one side are the Jews, who venerate the one true god in a permanent state of justice and purity, whilst on the other, the rest of mankind is ensnared by vice and violence, and drifts in the meanderings of its foolish euhemerism. This conclusion, however, fails to take into account the fact that the opinions of Eleazar, the fabricated high priest, are filtered by, and framed within, Aristeas’s “ethnographic” account.

4. The notion that alien influence is a source of corruption causing the neglect and eventual dissolving of a people’s traditions, or patria nomima, is in fact a recurrent motif in ancient historiography. According to Plutarch, Lycurgus explicitly forbade the Spartans to travel, fearing they would bring back customs foreign to their homeland and thus corrupt the political institutions he had carefully established. And foreigners, we are told, were regularly expelled from Sparta, so that they could not become “teachers of evil” (didaskaloi kakon) among the Spartans. The Mosaic legislation, with its “impregnable palisades and walls of iron,” has precisely such a function in Eleazar’s discourse, that is, to protect the Jews and their institutions from any corruptive osmosis with the outside world. They are thus less the expression of Jewish separatism or “misanthropy,” than an essential element of Aristeas’s description of the Jews as an alien wisdom able to serve as example of an ideal society.

We may also observe that the principles expressed by the Jewish high priest are echoed in Aristeas’s description of Judea itself. As noted by many commentators, Aristeas’s Judea can be interpreted as an image of both biblical Palestine and Aristotle’s ideal state. In Aristeas’s description, Judea occupies a central position with respect to its neighbours, while Jerusalem lies at the centre of Judea, and the Jewish temple at the very centre of Jerusalem. The city itself is described as being in all possible ways harmonious—that is, neither too big nor too small—in accordance with the sensible will of its original founders. Big cities, comments Aristeas, lead the country-dwellers to neglect the countryside and seek enjoyment. Such is notably the case of Alexandria, as the author of the Letter mischievously slips into Aristeas’s observation. In Judea, on the contrary, farmers are always at work, and the countryside flourishes despite its poor soil.

In this utopian country, protected by impregnable natural defences, one naturally expects to encounter

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16 Ad Phil. 138.  
17 Ad Phil. 139.  
18 Ad Phil. 140.  
19 Cf. Pl. Lg. 950a; DS I 96. With respect to the Jews, see Hecataeus of Abdera, in Phot. Bibl., cod. 244, 380a: “…when they became subject to foreign rule, as a result of their mingling with men of other nations (both under Persian rule and under that of the Macedonians who overthrew the Persians), many of their traditional practices were disturbed” (trans. Stern [infra, n. 23]).  
21 Ad Phil. 105-20.  
utopian inhabitants. Aristeas’s Judea in fact appears as a fantasized hierocracy, whose inhabitants abide by the laws established by their thorough lawyer. We may thus also understand that, contrary to other people whose customs could be suspected of having degenerated after the legislator’s passing (such as Sparta), the Jews, isolated by both their Law and the Judean landscape, have remained a model nation, escaping even the corruptive effects of time. Set apart from all nations, and devoting their time to the worship of the true god, the Jews are a “nation of philosophers,” an image obviously reminiscent of the earliest descriptions of the Jews we encounter in Greek literature, here appropriated to serve a redescription of the Jews in Greek terms.

5. The idealistic character of Aristeas’s account is nowhere more evident than in the banquet scene, on which our purported reporter admits to have lingered because of the great admiration he conceived toward the Jewish sages. The seventy-two translators are described by Aristeas as men who distinguish themselves through their merit and instruction. As trustworthy representatives of the Jerusalem high priest, they all are equally able to expound any passage of the Jewish Law with great precision. They lack all harshness and are remarkably cultured, mastering both Greek and Hebrew and being well trained in conversation. Furthermore, they are in all matters concerned with finding the happy medium. In the banquet organised in order to welcome them, they will thus reveal their most admirable character, not only to Aristeas but to all philosophers of the king’s court.

Typical of the philosophical table talk genre, the series of questions and answers we find in the symposium scene mostly pertain to kingship and rightful governance. Many questions bear on philosophical commonplace, such as “What is philosophy?” “What deserves to be considered beautiful?” “How can one resist pride?” On the whole, the dialogue presents us with an unoriginal mix of Hellenistic philosophy, the keywords of which would be temperance, sobriety, self-restraint, the quest for truth, right measure, and justice, and so on and so forth. While some of the answers put forth by the translators certainly betray a more “biblical” concern, nowhere in the symposium do we hear of the Jews, of Moses, or of his legislation.

In each of their answers, the translators nonetheless manage to place—even if sometimes quite artificially—a reference to the sovereign god. Thus leading the king to tell his philosophers: “I think the virtue of these men is extraordinary and their understanding very great, for having questions of such sort addressed to them they have given proper replies on the spur of the moment, all of them making God the starting point of their reasoning.” To this, one of the court philosophers provides a properly stoic answer, invoking pronoia, which governs all things. But, as the narrator subtly suggests, the king’s alien guests by far surpass the court philosophers in eloquence and erudition, and moreover, by taking God as primary principle. It is in that regard that they will eventually be

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24 Ad Phil. 293.

25 Ad Phil. 121-2.


27 Ad Phil. 200.

28 Ad Phil. 201.

29 Ad Phil. 235.
praised by all for their superior wisdom. Here too, the Jews appear as the representatives of an oriental wisdom invited to the philosophers’ table, that is, through the prism of a Greek imagination of “alien wisdoms.”30 As such, they are also able to teach the Greeks a lesson in philosophy—just as the Heliopolis priests taught Herodotus a lesson in history.31

6. Aristeas’s “theoretical” encounter with the Jews frames the Letter’s broader reflection on the relation between Jews and non-Jews. In this respect, the ways in which the author of the Letter constructs his characters is also worth considering. In fact, the figure of Aristeas himself (which certainly avoids the pitfall of Eleazar’s dichotomous worldview) both highlights and questions the border between Greeks and Jews. For Aristeas is indeed the best example that there are men among the “others” who do not fit into the picture of forsaken humanity painted in the high priest’s discourse.

Generally speaking, all the characters of the Letter are kaloi kai agathoi, men of culture, education, and principles. Eleazar is explicitly praised by Aristeas as a man full of nobleness (kalokagathia).32 Aristeas and Andreas, the two ambassadors, are in turn described by the Jewish high priest as men of great merit who stand out for their outstanding culture. Eleazar thus calls King Ptolemy a friend of the good, for surrounding himself with men of such instruction and judgement.33 Aristeas himself, recounting his intervention in view of freeing the Jews enslaved by Ptolemy I during the wars of the Diadochi, is eager to stress his philanthropy, as well as his concern for justice and the good.34 Philocrates, his virtual interlocutor, is presented as a man with a special interest in solemnity (semnotês), and characterized by his inquiring mind (philomates diathesis). Both Philocrates and his brother, we are told, have no interest in material wealth, but preoccupy themselves with the fulfilling of paideia and all that relates to it.35 As a matter of fact, Aristeas is introduced in the very first lines of the Letter as a man of special “predilection for the careful study of religious matters (ta theia).”36 His own curiosity, no less inquiring than his brother’s, led him to do some earlier research on the Jews with the “most erudite high priests in the most erudite land of Egypt.”37 And it is precisely out of the same curiosity, we learn, that he volunteered to travel to Judea, and meet this man in all matters admirable, the Jewish high priest, and his people.

Aristeas is indeed a learned “tourist,” attentive to the wonders and oddities, the thaumata, of the country he visits and its inhabitants. Yet as such, he is also an intermediary, a “bridge” that can—more subtly than the Jewish high priest—speak of the differences and the similarities between Jews and Greeks. Through this narrative figure, the author of the Letter thus establishes points of commensurability between the two cultures.

It is remarkable, for instance, that all the characters of the Letter, Jews or not, agree that there is only one sovereign god; the God who, suggests the author, granted a throne to the Egyptian king, and who watches over the kingdom’s harmony. Thus Aristeas reminds the king—in a phrase which, put in his mouth by a Jewish author, is not unsurprising—that “the same god who has given [the Jews] their Law guides your kingdom, as I have learned in my investigations. God, the overseer and creator of all things whom they worship, is He whom all men worship,
and we too, Your Majesty, though we address Him differently, as Zeus and Dis.” Doubtlessly such wise and educated gentlemen as those envisaged by the author could only agree with Eleazar’s disapproval of anthropomorphism and of the gullibility of the Egyptian masses.

7. The Letter of Aristeas is our earliest evidence to the development of the legend according to which a translation of the Jewish Law into Greek was ordered by the Egyptian king in the early days of the Ptolemaic dynasty, and entrusted to seventy or seventy-two Jewish sages invited for that purpose from Jerusalem to Alexandria. In fact, it is chiefly in consideration of it being a “true” witness to the origins of the Greek Bible that the work has crossed the centuries and come down to us. The translation narrative, however, makes up only the bare bones of the text; and I wish to suggest that, whatever the Letter’s value for our historical assessment of the origins of the Septuagint, questions pertaining to the text itself, to its author, and to its cultural context, are of no lesser significance. For all its fictitiousness, the Letter of Aristeas (like Herodotus’ Histories) is a story of cultural encounter—both in the narrative itself and in the extra-textual reality that produced this narrative, that of the Hellenized Jews the Letter addresses; Jews who would recognize themselves in Philocrates’ (the Letter’s virtual interlocutor) intellectual curiosity and thirst for knowledge; Jews who would readily learn from an outside observer such as “Aristeas,” that the Jewish way of life, including those customs which arouse curiosity, even scorn, are not irreconcilable with the principles of Greek paideia, and may on the contrary event be considered its highest expression. Undoubtedly, the Letter of Aristeas is a reflection on Jewish identity in a Hellenized world.

Scholars have underlined how this original “Greek book” exemplifies the acculturation of the Jews in the Hellenistic age. The work indeed reveals an author well steeped in Hellenic culture, with a distinctive mastery of the Greek language and of Greek literary canons. Some scholars have nevertheless suggested that this Hellenistic baggage is here being subverted in order to serve the purposes of the author’s panegyric of the Jews and of the Jewish Law. That is, that the author’s unambiguous Jewish identity, or rather, his sense of that identity, was in fact not dissolved but enhanced by his involvement with the “dominant” Greek culture. In fact, while advertising the points of cultural convergence between Jews and Greeks, the Letter also points at their limits. Thus, according to John Barclay, the text “demonstrates both the extent of [the author’s] acculturation and the limits of his assimilation.” The author of the Letter, writes Barclay, “never abandons the Jewish sense of difference,” and in fact “use[s] Hellenistic categories to define the terms of Jewish superiority.” In a sense this is true. Yet the Letter’s Jews are as fictive as their Greek interlocutor; they are a distorted image, an exaggeration, playing on both a Greek

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38 Ad Phil. 16.


41 BARCLAY, op. cit. (n. 11) 147-49.
representation of Judaism as an oriental wisdom, and a Jewish sense of singularity, all the more emphasized by the author’s self-conscious effort at “exotization.”

Cultural encounters both reify and renew cultural identities. By way of comparison, one may consider the case of the British in the context of colonial India; as historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam observes: “The British, once they had conquered India, did not remain—even a single generation afterwards—the British who had conquered it.”42 Cultural interactions necessarily produce original cultural identities, which, while claiming to stay the same, are fundamentally transformed. Hellenistic Judaism is one such “hybrid reality,” in which the Jews, to quote Erich Gruen, have not only “digested Hellenic culture,” but also “surmounted it.”43 What it meant to be a Jew, however, was inevitably transformed in the process.

The real Jews behind the Letter, the community at Alexandria, certainly delighted in hearing such a wondrous tale in which the Jews appear as the true paragons of philosophy, and the Jewish Law in Greek is deemed praiseworthy by Greek philosophers and by the Greek king himself. Speaking from the viewpoint of his purported Greek ethnographer, the author of the Letter can point to both the similarities and differences that allow Jews and Greeks to be two distinct cultural identities in a unique cultural environment. Through the voice of his fictive high priest, mediated by his no less fictive Greek tourist, the author of the Letter thus underlined that, by sticking to the Jewish Law and its many rules (and neglecting none of them) the Jews appear not as the tenants of parochial customs, but as a living people of philosophers, exercised in the constant practice of virtue, piety and justice—that is, in the philosophical way of life—and should as such be rightfully praised by the Ptolemaic king, Egyptian priests, and Greek philosophers and tourists alike.

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