

## ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS ON HELLENISTIC JUDAISM AND THE FIRST EVANGELIZATION OF GREEKS

*The Torah in the Diaspora: Praeparatio evangelica?* Outside of Palestine, i.e., in the Diaspora (“Dispersion” of Jews throughout the Greco-Roman world contemporaneous with Paul, who was himself a Diaspora, Hellenistic Jew), Judaism was even more strongly influenced by Greek thought than it was in the Holy Land. Hellenistic thought was oriented toward the universal, towards a “cosmopolitan” (“my city is the universe”) worldview.<sup>1</sup> Hellenistic Jewish authors such as Philo of Alexandria seek to demonstrate to pagans that Judaism is a rational religion according to the laws of nature.<sup>2</sup> Apologetics and an effort to be understood is behind this (e.g., Josephus).

Related to this are Jewish works, such as the Wisdom of Solomon, which have “a peculiar mixture of strict loyalty to the Torah . . . with an intellectual openness to the world.”<sup>3</sup> Other books are more radical, holding to “the thesis that the Torah has fundamental significance not only for the one chosen people, but for all peoples, all humanity — and not as a document in which Gentiles would find for themselves only rejection and scathing divine judgment.”<sup>4</sup> One such author, Aristobulos (150 B.C.E.), “proposes that the Torah be considered the property of all humanity . . . without expecting or even desiring that anyone should for this reason become a Jew.”<sup>5</sup>

This type of “Diaspora Judaism which was characterized by an openness to the world and a positive relationship to Hellenistic culture, and which on its own initiative had already reflected on how to overcome the dichotomy between the belief in the One God for all humankind and the nationalistic and particularistic effect of every kind of Torah propaganda that simultaneously adhered to the claim that the Torah was given to Israel alone,” would seem to be behind the group that the converted Paul fell in with (about which more below).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> NIKOLAUS WALTER, “Hellenistic Jews of the Diaspora,” in *The New Testament and Hellenistic Judaism*, in *The New Testament and Hellenistic Judaism* (P. Borgen – S. Giversen, eds.) (Aarhus, Denmark – Peabody, MA 1995), 41.

<sup>2</sup> See HELMUT KOESTER, *Introduction to the New Testament. volume one: History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Philadelphia 1982), 144, 276, 280.

<sup>3</sup> WALTER, “Hellenistic Jews,” 49.

<sup>4</sup> WALTER, “Hellenistic Jews,” 49. JOHN J. COLLINS, *Between Athens and Jerusalem. Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (Grand Rapids, 2000), 252-260, emphasizes the universalism of such Diaspora works as 2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch and 3 (Greek Apocalypse of) Baruch (which he dates to not long after 70 C.E. and which he notes does have an eschatological judgment, but of an individualistic, ethical sort as opposed to one along nationalistic or ethnic lines) and *Testament of Abraham* (late first century C.E.), which understand the Torah as requiring “natural justice” (such as feeding the hungry; cf. Isa 58:6-7; Matt 25:31-46), and which draw no distinction between Jew and Gentile (no stress or even mention of the hallmarks of Judaism). The only inviolable point is monotheism. This “natural law” position is argued by Paul in Rom 2:14-15; see HELMUT KOESTER, *Introduction to the New Testament. volume two: History and Literature of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia 1982), 140 (in class handout).

<sup>5</sup> WALTER, “Hellenistic Jews,” 49. The later Rabbinic view was that “it was a dark day for Israel when the translated Torah . . . was made available to Gentiles;” *ibid.* 50. After 70 C.E., Pharisaic-Rabbinic Judaism blocked out Hellenization and openness to the Gentiles by “the complete elimination of the Septuagint and all Jewish literature written in Greek,” conscious of the fact that these opened up the traditions of Israel to the nations; *ibid.* 58.

<sup>6</sup> WALTER, “Hellenistic Jews,” 53. Exclusivistic Torah regulations (the typical and most important being circumcision, the sabbath and the dietary laws) were thus relativized. Cf. MARTIN HENGEL, *Judaism and*

Adopting Eusebius of Caesarea's expression (translated into Latin), *praeparatio evangelica*, certain scholars such as Martin Hengel use it to refer to the service which Hellenistic Judaism performed for primitive Christianity by thinking of the Torah as a universal law for all peoples which did not require them to adopt the distinctive hallmarks of Judaism.<sup>7</sup>

*The "Stephen Group" and the Evangelization of Paul.* In Acts 6:5, Stephen heads a list of some "Hellenists" (contrasted with "Hebrews," but all Jews, including a proselyte from Antioch ). Stephen engages in bitter debate with other Diaspora Jews, 6:9-14.<sup>8</sup> Stephen represents a group with a virulent anti-Temple and Law position attributed to Jesus (v. 14).<sup>9</sup> The dispute ends with the stoning of Stephen, which may have been a Jewish legal execution. According to Luke, it is part of "a great persecution" unleashed against the Jerusalem Church in which Saul/Paul participates (8:1). In Luke's divine scheme of things, the persecution results in the spread of the Gospel. Some who fled the persecution went to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (11:19), the coast on the border between Palestine and Asia Minor in the region of Cilicia (Paul's) and Syria.<sup>10</sup> At first, they preach only to Jews, but then some Cypriots and Cyreneans came to Antioch and preached also to the pagan Greeks (v. 20). This will result in the beginnings of the divide between Judaism and Christianity, requiring a new name for the Jewish sect: "Christians," v. 26.

The Hellenistic Jewish-Christian followers of Stephen now explicitly elevated and made central what was only potentially present in the spontaneous openness of Jesus and his first disciples. The Hellenistic Jews who joined the Jesus movement saw in Jesus' devotion to the religious outcasts and the degraded *among* the Jewish people (and only occasionally, at the fringe, also beyond the borders), the triggering impulse for the notion, which was already latent in them, that God's devotion to all of his creatures among all peoples cannot end with the national and ritual-cultic boundaries of the One People, chosen and distinguished by means of the Torah, but, to the contrary, must rather genuinely benefit all human beings in like manner and by the same "right"— and must therefore be made known also to all through missionary preaching.<sup>11</sup>

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*Hellenism. Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period, vol. I* (English Translation; London 1974), 174, 301-302; COLLINS, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 160, 162, 164, 249, 251.

<sup>7</sup> WALTER, "Hellenistic Jews," 55.

<sup>8</sup> The converted Paul will likewise engage in mortal verbal combat, probably against his very former co-partisans, Acts 9:22, 29.

<sup>9</sup> WALTER, "Hellenistic Jews," 52, opines that the group's relativization of Torah and Temple worship was a necessary consequence of their openness to the salvation of all humanity, which Torah and Temple would serve to divide from the Jews. This is a step beyond the position of Peter and Jesus' original disciples, to which it "is perhaps not directly traceable," *ibid.* 53. Stephen's group may well have been quite independent if not at odds with Peter's Jerusalem leadership; *ibid.* 39; cf. Gal 1:18-22; 2:6-9, 11-14. See J.D.G. DUNN, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville 1990), 27-30, 34-35, 45-47. For Paul's position that the Law must not and cannot divide Jew and Gentile, see Gal 3:23-29.

<sup>10</sup> Cyrene and Cyprus were quite Hellenized cities with a sizeable —and very messianically insurrectionistic, due to socio-economic reasons— Jewish population at the time of the various Jewish revolts (66-73, 115, 132-135 C.E.). All the Cypriot Jews were exterminated.

<sup>11</sup> WALTER, "Hellenistic Jews," 53.