

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Epistle of Aristeas

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The *Epistle* (a *diēgēsis*, “Narrative”) of *Aristeas* purports to be an eyewitness account by a Gentile official at the court of Ptolemy II Philadelphus of the circumstances that led to the translation of the Septuagint. The story of the translation, however, is peripheral, the bulk of the book being concerned with a panegyric on the Jewish people and the superiority of their religion, ethics and wisdom to those of the Gentiles.

1. The Contents of the Book

The book falls naturally into three main parts, with a proem and an epilogue.

In the proem (*Epistle of Aristeas* 1–8) Aristeas dedicates his book to his brother (*Epistle of Aristeas* 7, 120) Philocrates and announces its theme: the translation of the Jewish law (*Epistle of Aristeas* 3).

In the first major section (*Epistle of Aristeas* 9–34a) Demetrius of Phalerum, the librarian, reports to King Ptolemy II Philadelphus that he had already collected more than two hundred thousand books, his aim being soon to bring their number to five hundred thousand, and informs the king of the desirability to include the Jewish law, which needed to be translated (*Epistle of Aristeas* 9–11). Aristeas, a Gentile at court (*Epistle of Aristeas* 16, 40, 43), petitions the release of about one hundred thousand Jewish captives as a goodwill gesture to the Jewish high priest Eleazar, ostensibly to dispose him to provide the translators (*Epistle of Aristeas* 12–18). Following the report of Demetrius (*Epistle of Aristeas* 28–32), the king consents not only to the liberation of the captives but also to sending sumptuous gifts to Eleazar with a letter in his name (*Epistle of Aristeas* 19–34a).

This section (*Epistle of Aristeas* 34b–300) constitutes the bulk of the epistle and is concerned with the king’s letter to Eleazar requesting six scholars from each tribe (*Epistle of Aristeas* 35–40) and Eleazar’s complying reply (*Epistle of Aristeas* 41–46) naming the seventy-two scholars (*Epistle of Aristeas* 47–50). The author then indulges in a long description of the king’s presents to Eleazar (*Epistle of Aristeas* 51–82), Jerusalem (*Epistle of Aristeas* 83–120), the temple (*Epistle of Aristeas* 84–91), the priestly offices and the temple sacrifices (*Epistle of Aristeas* 92–95), the high-priestly vestments (*Epistle of Aristeas* 96–99), the citadel (*Epistle*

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of *Aristeas* 100–104), the city and its environs (*Epistle of Aristeas* 105–11) and trade (*Epistle of Aristeas* 112–20). He continues with Eleazar's farewell to the translators (*Epistle of Aristeas* 121–27), a long exposé by Eleazar of the superiority of the Jewish law and criticism of Gentile idolatry and immorality (*Epistle of Aristeas* 128–69), Eleazar's sacrifices and the departure of the scholars (*Epistle of Aristeas* 172). The section ends with the honorable reception of the translators by the king (*Epistle of Aristeas* 173–86) and the seven-day feast that the king holds in their honor during which, asked very hard questions on politics, royal behavior, and so on, each of the scholars distinguishes himself by giving answers that amazed not only Aristeas but also the Gentile philosophers present (*Epistle of Aristeas* 187–300).

Having been feasted, the translators are taken to a building specially prepared, and they apply themselves to their task (*Epistle of Aristeas* 301). The translation is arrived at in session during which they compared their views (*Epistle of Aristeas* 302: "They proceeded in such a way that agreement among them was reached on every point by comparison" [lit., "confrontation"]). The work proceeded from morning to 3 o'clock in the afternoon and was completed in seventy-two days (*Epistle of Aristeas* 307). The translation is read to the Jews of Alexandria, who ratify it and pronounce curses on anyone who might change anything in it (*Epistle of Aristeas* 308–11), after which the king hears it read and is delighted, and he charges Demetrius to take good care of it (*Epistle of Aristeas* 312–17). The translators are sent back to Judea with gifts (*Epistle of Aristeas* 318–21).

In the epilogue (*Epistle of Aristeas* 322) Aristeas charges Philocrates to avoid reading myths and concentrate instead only on true stories like his own.

2. The Historical Background

Aristeas's claim that the translation of the LXX (only the Law) took place during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (coregent with his father, Ptolemy I Soter since 285 B.C., sole king 282–246 B.C.) while Demetrius of Phalerum (350?-283/2 B.C., see Diogenes Laertius *Vitae* 5.75–83) was the librarian and the philosopher Menedemos of Eretria (339/8–265 B.C., see Diogenes Laertius *Vitae* 2.125–44) was at the Alexandrian court, is unhistorical. Demetrius, who was invited to Egypt by Ptolemy Soter in 297 B.C., was the founder of the museum and in all probability of the library but apparently never served as librarian, especially under Philadelphus (see Alexandrian Library). He was banished by Philadelphus at the death of his father, Soter, for having advised against his succession to the throne, and shortly thereafter he died. The first librarian was Zenodotos (see P. Oxy. 1241 for a list of librarians), who entered his office in 285 (–270 B.C.) being succeeded

lit. literally

P. Oxy. *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, B. P. Grenfell, A. S. Hunt, et al. (London, 1898–)

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by Apollonios Rhodios (270–245 B.C.). Furthermore Menedemos, who once did visit Cyprus, is not known to have visited Alexandria. The apocryphal stories about the divine punishment of Theopompos (c. 378–300 B.C.), who during his Alexandrian visit in 305 B.C. was almost put to death by Soter for being a busybody (*polypragmōn*, which may well explain the legend), and Theodectes (c. 375–334 B.C.; *Epistle of Aristeas* 314–16) are otherwise unknown.

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3. The Character of the Book

The unhistorical framework is surpassed by the fantastic presentation of the main characters of the story—all Gentiles—as though they were devout converts to Judaism. Thus, not only Aristeas, a Gentile, intercedes repeatedly for the captive Jews (*Epistle of Aristeas* 12–19) and speaks with excessive admiration for the Jewish people and their law, but also Demetrius knows that “the law is august and of divine origin, and that God punished busybodies” (*Epistle of Aristeas* 313).

The fantasy of *Aristeas* runs riot with Ptolemy’s behavior. Ptolemy is presented as addressing a humble request to his vassal Eleazar as to an equal at the fabulous expense of 200–300 talents of gold (*Epistle of Aristeas* 33, 319–20), 170 talents of silver (*Epistle of Aristeas* 33, 40), precious stones five times the value of the gold (*Epistle of Aristeas* 82), granting, moreover, the return of more than one hundred thousand Jews—almost a second exodus—at 400 talents manumission costs (*Epistle of Aristeas* 20, 37), and finally giving the unredeemable promise of the release of all Jews in the world now and in the future (*Epistle of Aristeas* 38). It is utterly incredible that this behavior should come from one of those kings who had given orders to confiscate any books found on ships visiting Egypt, and who had borrowed from Athens the standard edition of the three great tragedians (Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides) in order to have them copied, giving 15 talents as guarantee for their return, but who, afterward, kept the original and sent back a copy (*Historia tou Hellenikou Ethnous*, 2:278–79; see also Galen, *In Hippokratidis lib. 3 epid. comm.*, 607–8). But there is more.

Contrary to custom, according to which Ptolemy let royal ambassadors wait for thirty days before being admitted to his presence, the translators gain immediate admittance (*Epistle of Aristeas* 174–76). At the showing of the parchments the king, like a pious Jew, makes his devout sevenfold obeisance before the law (*Epistle of Aristeas* 177) and thanks God for his oracles (*Epistle of Aristeas* 177). Eleazar praises the king’s “piety toward our God” (*Epistle of Aristeas* 42). At the banquet the king dismisses his own priests and requests the oldest of the translators to offer prayers (*Epistle of Aristeas* 184). At the reading of the completed translation the king is astonished that such wonderful writings

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were not mentioned by any Greek historians (*Epistle of Aristeas* 312), bows devoutly before them and commits them to Demetrius's safekeeping (*Epistle of Aristeas* 317). At the end, in typically pseudepigraphical fashion Aristeas protests his truthfulness: "I have related the story just as it happened, keeping myself pure from all blame" (*Epistle of Aristeas* 297), and then distinguishes himself from "mythologists" (*Epistle of Aristeas* 322).

The apologetic nature of *Aristeas* is so transparent that Bentley (in 1699) called it "a clumsy cheat." It may therefore appear all the more surprising that the character of the book does not seem to have been exposed before L. Vives (in 1522), J. J. Scalinger (1609) and especially H. Hody (in 1684) (see Jellicoe, 31–32). This has its explanation not in any supposed credulity on the part of Christian Greek authors, but in the circumstance that they found in this work a convenient account that sanctioned the equation of the LXX with the Hebrew text. Thus Aristeas not only escaped their censure but also his account was embellished by some of them.

In spite of its unhistorical character in details, the *Epistle of Aristeas* contains a core of historical truth: the Hebrew law book was translated sometime in the third century B.C.; the translation was executed by Alexandrian Jewry; it was a group effort; and by the second century B.C. it had not yet been accorded equality with the Masoretic Text.

4. The Reception of *Aristeas* by Later Jewish and Christian Authors

In spite of *Aristeas*'s extravagances in propagating the Jewish cause, its account of the translation of the LXX is fairly restrained, and herein lies its value. The translators arrived at the adopted text after discussion and comparison of their several proposals. This realistic procedure is later exchanged for a miraculous one. The earliest author showing knowledge of the contents of *Aristeas* is the Jewish author Aristobulus (180–145 B.C.), who argued that Greek philosophy derived from the OT, which had been translated into Greek before the translation executed under Philadelphus (Eusebius *Praeparatio Evangelica* 13.12.1–2; cf. Gooding, *passim*).

With Philo (*De Vita Mosis* 2.6–7) the translators have become inspired "prophets" and write "not each one different things, but the same word for word, as though each one was tutored by an invisible prompter." It is a moot question whether Philo reflects *Aristeas* or has knowledge of the story independently (the same goes for Aristobulus). Josephus, however, is the first author to refer explicitly to *Aristeas* and reproduce a large part of it (Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 12.2 §§1–118).

OT Old Testament
passim throughout, frequently

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The first Christian author to mention *Aristeas* is Justin Martyr, who, however, has Philadelphus address not Eleazar but King Herod (Justin Martyr *Apology I*, 31). The miraculous line struck out by Philo is followed by Irenaeus. He (in *Adversus Haereses* 3.21.2, in Eusebius *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.8.11–15) has Ptolemy Soter rather than Philadelphus address the Jerusalemites rather than Eleazar. Once in Alexandria, the king separated the translators to avoid any secret agreement among them but found, to his surprise, that “they all had translated the same things with the same words.” A similar story is related by Clement of Alexandria (*Stromateis* 1.22). Extended quotations of *Aristeas* occur in Eusebius (*Praeparatio Evangelica* 8.2–5, 9).

5. The Date

There is no consensus on the date of *Aristeas*. The proposed dates range between 200 B.C. and A.D. 33. The first century A.D. may be dismissed as too improbable for such a letter to be written at a time when the LXX was well established. In general, scholars have held to 200–170 B.C. (e.g., Schürer, Orlinsky, Tramontano, Pelletier, Jellicoe, Shutt), 150–100 (e.g., Andrews, Bickermann, Kahle, Hadas, Würthwein) and the first century B.C. (e.g., Wendland, Thackeray, Riessler). The internal evidence of *Aristeas* is indecisive. If we could be certain that Aristobulus quoted *Aristeas* (Eusebius *Praeparatio Evangelica* 13.12; cf. Fraser 1:694), then the work ought to have been written before 150 B.C. However, the use of Aristobulus by *Aristeas* cannot be ruled out, and it is not improbable that both drew from an earlier work.

The peaceful and prosperous conditions in Palestine (*Epistle of Aristeas* 84–171) might reflect an idyllic view of the circumstances before the Seleucid conquest of Judea (c. 198 B.C.). The citadel of Jerusalem (*Epistle of Aristeas* 100), which should be distinguished from the later Syrian fortress (cf., e.g., 1 Macc 1:33; 13:49–52; Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 12.4.4 cf.252; *Jewish Wars* 5.4.1 cf.§136–41), is probably that mentioned by Nehemiah 2:8; 7:2 (see also 2 Macc 4:12, 27; 5:5; Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 12.3.3 cf.§133, 138) and later rebuilt as Antonia, thus reflecting an earlier date. An earlier date is also suggested by the depiction of the high priest as a theocratic leader and of the priests as performing spontaneously their duties (*Epistle of Aristeas* 92–96), both of whom, somewhat later, had come under the spell of Hellenism. The knowledge by *Aristeas* of Egyptian protocol implies a Jew in high office, something that was possible under Ptolemy VI Philometor (180–145 B.C.). Jellicoe’s suggestion, following Klijn’s lead, that it was written to vindicate the claims of the LXX and of the Jerusalem temple over against those of the new Jewish center, Onias’s temple at Leontopolis (c. 160 B.C.; cf. Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 12.7 cf.§387–88; 13.3.1–3 cf.§62–73; 13.4 cf.§283–87; *Jewish Wars* 7.10.2–3 cf.§421–36), and its supposed rival version, would explain the bulk of the book. However, in the absence of any evidence for the existence of such a version, this view is incapable of proof. By

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contrast, Orinsky has used the absence of any reference in *Aristeas* to the temple of Leontopolis to support an earlier date. At present the best option is to date *Aristeas* at about 200 or at the latest 170 B.C. (but see Fraser 1:696; 2:970–71).

6. The Purpose

Like the date, the purpose of the book has defied solution. The ostensible reason for *Aristeas* was to describe the origin of the LXX translation, though in reality it was to promote the Jewish faith. The question is whether *Aristeas* is addressed to Gentile or to Jewish readers. At a time when the Greek language, literature and culture were making a strong impact upon the Jews, in particular Diaspora Jews, who, severed from their fatherland, from the temple and its sacrifices—the symbols and rallying point of their particularistic religion—were in danger of distancing themselves from their ancestors' faith, it was quite natural that an idyllic account of Judaism and the esteem it had enjoyed with Greek monarchs and philosophers were felt to be the needed antidote. *Aristeas* was not written for Greek readers: its simplistic narrative and historical blunders could not but alienate them and thus defeat its purpose. It was written for Jewish consumption outside Palestine, in particular Alexandria.²

² Caragounis, C. C. (2000). "Aristeas, Epistle Of." In *Dictionary of New Testament background: a compendium of contemporary biblical scholarship* (electronic ed., pp. 114–118). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.