The Jews of Italy in Antiquity are often described as Hellenistic. The term is comprehensive and extends over language, literature, ritual in the synagogue and the cemetery, and some instances of its application may have caused Greeks born and bred to turn in their graves. Without additional qualification the term simply means acculturation, especially of Greek language, culture and civilization as practised by the successor populations in the countries conquered by Alexander the Great. How far Hellenization penetrated into various Graeco-Roman societies is disputable. What exactly is meant by the term over a period of many centuries in diverse societies has been the subject of scholarly tussles for years and will probably remain so for years to come. It varies from place to place and from time to time and consists of many components. Thus Josephus has been called a Hellenistic Jew, while by his own description he was a Jewish Pharisee, wrote his books in Hebrew/Aramaic, and had to get help to improve his Greek and to shape the texts into acceptable Greek, for he was writing for a Greek speaking readership.

According to Theodoret, a Syrian bishop of the first half of the fifth century, Jewish children spoke the language of the people in whose country they were born. Only after they were older they learned to read Hebrew and “through the written word gained knowledge of holy scripture which is written in Hebrew”. That would indicate that the children’s Hebrew often was passive rather than active. It may apply to Italy, since Theodoret lists Italy among the countries and peoples were children first learn the vernacular. While this is a general observation, even if it was the rule also in Italy, it probably was not evenly distributed all over the Italian peninsula. Thus to the Jews of the South, particularly those in Magna Graecia, Greek may have been the vernacular, whereas in Rome and further north Latin was the language spoken by the inhabitants. As for Latin, there are said to have existed numerous local dialects of the language. However, these are no more than assumptions, often not supported by documentary evidence. Local variations, the influx of a new wave of immigrants and other events and circumstances must have left their imprint on local conditions. In short, there was no discernable universal pattern of Greek influence on the Jews in Italy and on their practices, and for that matter elsewhere in Antiquity, such as in Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, the Balkans, and so forth.
The rabbis are said to have had little Greek, yet admired Greek and its culture, but at various times issued strictures and prohibitions on Greek “wisdom” and its study, while at the same time making allowances for members of the Patriarch’s family and court, in view of their links to government circles. As many as 2,500 Greek terms and expressions are said to have been introduced into Hebrew and Aramaic in Antiquity, as against only 300 or so of Latin, although the latter was the official language of the imperial government. So a fitting definition of “Hellenistic” Jews would appear elusive, and each group of Jews, such as the one in Italy, has to be evaluated based on the information available; that being exiguous more often than not.1

Greek influence made itself felt in Judaea long before Alexander set foot in the Middle East. Thus Greek symbols began to appear on coins minted in Judaea as early as the middle of the fifth century BCE, although the designers of the coins may not have been aware of the origins of the symbols. Pottery found in Judaea has been identified as Greek. Other contacts between Greeks and Jews are said to be traceable back to even earlier times. By the time of the conflict between the Hasmoneans, Hellenistic Jews and their Diadochian masters, the assimilation of Hellenism by Jews had assumed much wider propor-

1 For Josephus, see JCA, 1.9; Id., JA, 20.11.2. Theodoretus, Quaestiones, PG, 80, col. 165; Colorni, L’uso del greco, cit., p. 30. Theodoret describes the situation in the Syrian Diaspora, particularly in Antioch, which may or may not reflect on Italy. Some scholars deny all knowledge of Hebrew to the Jews in ancient Rome. They even jump to the conclusion that “the opinion of the rabbis were probably quite unknown to them”. See Leon, op. cit., pp. 226f., who bases his contention on the almost complete absence of Hebrew among the epitaphs of Roman graveyards. See also below. The literature on Jewish Hellenism is vast and we mean to no more than highlight the main views presented by scholars on that topic. On Jews and their relationship to Greek and Hellenism, see Lewy, op. cit., passim. If many Jews in Antiquity (anachronistically quoting Ben Jonson on the bard of Stratford) “had small Greek and less Latin”, they were supposed to have been Hellenistic Jews all the same. Lieberman, Greek and Hellenism, pp. 161f. suggests that the rabbis in Judaea had no Latin at all and belittles the efforts to find Latinisms in rabbinic texts. That of course has no bearing on Italy. See also, Ibid., pp. 225f. There Lieberman argues that the strictures on “Greek wisdom” in rabbinic sources were limited to the instruction of children in that wisdom and did not include learning or reading it by adults. As usual, that is controversial. On the use or the three languages in inscriptions, see Noy, Writing in Tongues, pp. 300f. The influence of Greek dialectics on rabbinic reasoning is also controversial. On the diffusion of Greek in ancient Rome, see Goold, Greek Professorial Circle at Rome, cit., pp. 196f. For an overall portrayal of Hellenism, see CAH, 7, passim; and for the relationship with Judaism and Christianity, see Hengel, ‘Hellenization’ of Judaism, passim; Horst, Hellenism-Judaism-Christianity, passim; Levine, The Hellenistic Roman Diaspora, pp. 991f., and below.