INTRODUCTION:  
THE INFLUENCE OF HELLENISM ON JEWS IN PALESTINE IN THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD

1. The State of the Question

During the past half century the monumental works by Goodenough (1953-68) and Hengel (1969, English trans. 1974) deserve special mention in seeking to break down the cultural barrier between Palestine and the Diaspora in the Hellenistic period. But how convincing is the case that they have presented? Moreover, in a way, even though he disagreed fundamentally with Goodenough in his evaluation of Philo, Wolfson (1948) likewise saw a fundamental bridge between Philo and the Palestinian rabbis when he postulated that Philo was a bilateral branch of Pharisaic Judaism, though it is fair to say that this particular view of Wolfson has not gained general acceptance in the scholarly world.¹

Since the appearance of Martin Hengel’s *Judentum und Hellenismus* in 1969 and especially since the publication of the English version in 1974, this monumental work has been the subject of a tremendous amount of scholarly attention. It is fair to say that the majority of scholars have accepted Hengel’s thesis that Jews and Judaism in Palestine were already significantly influenced by Hellenism in the third and second centuries B.C.E. before the Maccabean revolt as seen in Jewish books of that era and archaeological evidence, and that the distinction between Diaspora and Palestinian Judaism, so far as Hellenization is concerned, is blurred.

Indeed, two conferences, one at Bar Ilan University in 1998, entitled “Shem in the Tents of Japhet: I: Jewish Writings in Second Temple Times” and another at Harvard University in 1999 entitled “Shem in the Tents of Japhet II: A Conference on Hellenism and Judaism,” resulted in the publication of a volume of essays edited by James Kugel.² Another symposium co-sponsored by the University

¹ See Levine 1998, 8, n. 6.
² Kugel 2002.
of Chicago and the University of Notre Dame in 1999 resulted in the publication of a volume of essays edited by John Collins and Gregory Sterling. Both supported Hengel’s thesis and carried it even further.

However, before Alexander in the fourth century b.c.e. opened up much of the Mediterranean world and beyond to Greek thought, ancient travelers, such as Hecataeus of Miletus and Herodotus, as Momigliano has pointed out, did not find it easy to go into the interior of countries; and hence we must not expect that Greeks might have attempted to go up to Jerusalem to view the way Jews celebrated their festivals. Moreover, Greeks were generally monolingual and hence would have had difficulty in speaking to Jews. Furthermore, the Greeks disturbed the peace of the Persian Empire at the very time that Jerusalem was being rebuilt under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah and would hardly have been welcomed.

To be sure, as Momigliano has noted, there are a number of developments in Judaea in the fifth and fourth centuries that parallel contemporary developments in Greece. Thus Nehemiah in some sense is a tyrant similar to Histiaeus and others who had been imposed as tyrants over Greek cities in Asia Minor by the Persians. Other parallels are the remission of debts and the law against intermarriages. Furthermore, the autobiographies of Ezra and Nehemiah remind one of the Epidemiai (“Visits”) of their contemporary, the fifth-century b.c.e. Ion of Chios, who recounts meetings with such famous political and literary figures as Cimon, Aeschylus, and Sophocles. Moreover, Momigliano cites the parallel between the biblical Book of Chronicles as a rewritten version of the Book of Kings and the works of the historians Ephorus and Theopompus in, to some degree, rewriting the works of Herodotus and Thucydides. Finally, he notes the parallel between the Book of Job and Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound in their treatment of the problem of theodicy. However, the crucial point of difference in these parallel accounts is that no Greek mentions or attacks the Jewish parallel, and no Jew mentions or attacks the Greek parallel, and hence there is no reason to assume that either was aware of the other.

3 Collins and Sterling 2001.
4 Momigliano 1975, 74.
5 Momigliano 1975, 81.
6 Momigliano 1975, 81.