CHAPTER TWO

THE SEPTUAGINT: THE FIRST TRANSLATION OF THE TORAH AND ITS EFFECTS

1. Introduction: The Importance of Alexandria

Surely one of the greatest reformers in Jewish history was a non-Jew, Alexander the Great, who, in his brief lifetime in the fourth century B.C.E., did much to spread the Greek language and Greek thought among the various peoples that he conquered. From a Jewish point of view, the most significant thing that he did was to establish cities, the most important being Alexandria in Egypt, where he invited Jews to settle (Josephus, Against Apion 2.35) and where, according to at least one papyrus fragment (Papyri Giessen University 5.46) dating from the first century C.E. the Jews numbered 180,000 in a total population of perhaps 500,000 to 600,000—30 to 36 per cent of the whole.¹ Moreover, the Jews were either citizens or were granted isopolity (equal rights) with the Greeks (Josephus, Against Apion 2.38),² though they were, in any case, to a considerable degree self-governed. Indeed, Josephus (Antiquities 14.188) says explicitly that Julius Caesar in the first century B.C.E. set up a bronze tablet for the Jews in Alexandria declaring that they were citizens, though, admittedly, there is good reason for disputing Josephus’ motives in making such a statement.³

Inasmuch as Alexandria within a century after its founding apparently displaced Athens as the cultural center of the Mediterranean world, the Jews, who until the fourth century B.C.E. had been largely farmers in Eretz Israel and Babylonia, rather suddenly found themselves in

¹ See Delia 1988, 286-88.
² The matter is disputed. See Kasher 1985, 233-61. Gruen 2002, 73, convincingly calls attention to the statement in the London Papyrus 1912 (Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum 153, lines 94-95) in which the Emperor Claudius advises the Jews of Alexandria not to aim at more rights than they have previously had, the implication being that they did not possess the rights of citizenship.
³ See Barclay 1996, 70.
large numbers in the midst of the leading center of Greek culture. In effect, Alexandria was the New York City of its day.

2. The Purpose and Importance of the Septuagint

Our earliest papyri pertaining to the Jews of Egypt are in Aramaic, presumably reflecting the language that they brought with them from Eretz Israel; but within two generations, certainly by 270 B.C.E., the papyri are no longer in Aramaic but rather in Greek. It was approximately in that year, according to a number of sources—the Pseudepigraphic Letter of Aristeas; Philo, De Vita Mosis 2.25-44; Josephus, Antiquities 12.12-118; Talmud, Megillah 9a-b, Soferim 1.7—that Ptolemy II Philadelphia is said to have commissioned a translation on the island of Pharos off the coast of Alexandria by seventy or seventy-two (hence Septuagint) Jewish elders from Jerusalem of the Torah into Greek for the huge library that he was establishing in Alexandria. As Bickerman,⁴ who is not addicted to exaggeration, points out, this is the most important translation ever made; “it opened the Bible to the world and the world to the Word of G-d. Without this translation London and Rome would still be heathen, and the Scriptures would be no better known than the Egyptian Book of the Dead.” Whether Ptolemy’s purpose in doing this was to show favor to the Jews, whose backing he needed inasmuch as he and his Macedonian and Greek followers amounted to no more than perhaps ten per cent of the population of Egypt and hence he needed the support of the Jews as middlemen in administration and as soldiers in his army, there is certainly significance in the fact (Letter of Aristeas 308) that the translation, when completed, was presented first to the Jewish community and only thereafter (Letter of Aristeas 312) to King Ptolemy. Whether the translation was needed by the Jews to combat anti-Semitism, such as that embedded in the work by Manetho of about the same period, or to combat the Samaritan claims to the priority of their Torah, or perhaps to win converts to Judaism, certainly the translation was particularly useful, since apparently the great majority of the Jews in Egypt by that time had forgotten their Hebrew and Aramaic.