

JEWISH SURVIVAL IN LATE ANTIQUE ALEXANDRIA

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For Peter Brown

Of all the books filling the bookshelves, or *bibliothēkai*, in the great library of Hellenistic Alexandria, the one which would be destined to have the most successful and far-reaching career, which would exert, by far, the deepest influence on Western religious and cultural history, was not any of those coming from classical Athens, but the rather bland and awkward Greek version of one of the “Sacred Books of the East” which the Ptolemies sought to collect.¹ The Septuagint soon found its myth in the *Epistle of Aristeas*. Yet, it stands to reason that the translation was not only made by Jews, but also for Jews, and that it remained little read by Greeks in Alexandria, despite their participation, together with the Jews, in the annual festival honoring the translation project, “the feast and general assembly in the island of Pharos,” the mass picnic on the seashore described by Philo.² The Septuagint represents the most impressive monument of Jewish Hellenism, the acme of what one might be tempted to call the cultural symbiosis between Jews and Greeks in Ptolemaic Alexandria, were it not that such a concept painfully evokes that of the “German-Jewish symbiosis.” In Philo’s time, indeed, the cultural achievements of the Jewish *politeuma* belonged to the past, and the coexistence between Greeks, Egyptians, and Jews—

¹ Cf. the words of P. Vidal-Naquet: “Cependant, pour que le monde romain devienne juif, il a fallu d’abord que les juifs devinssent grecs. Selon le mot que je cite souvent d’Elias Bickerman, ‘Les juifs sont devenus le peuple du Livre quand ce livre a été traduit en grec.’ C’est là une longue histoire, qui commence à Alexandrie mais dont Jérusalem est également partie prenante.” *L’Atlantide: petite histoire d’un mythe platonicien* (Paris, 2005), 53. I should like to thank my colleagues Oded Irshai, Daniel Schwartz, and Miriam Fraenkel for their useful remarks.

² *Vita Mosis* II. 41–42 [LCL VI, 469]. See E. Starobinski-Safran, “La communauté juive d’Alexandrie à l’époque de Philon,” in *Alexandrina: Mélanges offerts au P. Claude Mondésert* (Paris, 1992), 45–75. On the Septuagint, see S. Honigman, *The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria: A Study in the Narrative of the Letter of Aristeas* (London, 2003); and A. Wasserstein and D. J. Wasserstein, *The Legend of the Septuagint, from Antiquity to Today* (Cambridge, 2005).

which had always remained at best fragile—was about to collapse for good. Pogroms could now be launched by the Roman authorities (for instance in 38 C.E.), the Jews of Alexandria could now be forcefully dislodged and concentrated, under squalid conditions, into one of the five quarters of the city, into what we should perhaps call the first ghetto in Jewish history, ages before that of Venice, which dates from 1516. The worst, though, was yet to come, in large-scale massacres after the Jewish messianic revolt stemming from Cyrenaica in 115, which would bring about the practical extinction of the Alexandrian Jewish community in 117.³ It is of course only much later, in the Christianized Empire, that world fame would come to the Septuagint, when the golden days of Alexandrian Judaism had paled in the cultural memory of the Jews, receding into two or three short and ambivalent references in the Talmud.⁴ For the Sages of Israel, the glory that had been Alexandria was bound to end in catastrophe, as it was only just heavenly punishment for the sin of having dared to go back to Egypt, the land of slavery.⁵ As is well-known, the Septuagint and Philo were soon erased from Jewish memory, and it is only thanks to the Church Fathers that remnants of Jewish Hellenistic literature have reached us.

What became, then, of Alexandrian Judaism? Could the fate of Hellenistic Jews have been annihilation? Or did it, rather, go underground, disappearing only from our limited field of vision? For Joseph Scaliger, this represented a major question of historical scholarship. For him, this fate emulated that of the ten lost tribes of Israel, which occupied some of the best minds in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Did the Jews all convert to the new faith, recognizing, in opposition to other Jewish communities, the Messiah? After all, Philo, a contemporary of Paul who had testified about the first monks, the Therapeutae, could in a sense be considered as the first Church Father. The thesis of the mass conversion of Alexandrian Jews to Christianity in the early second century seems to have found much of its appeal in the dramatic lack of evidence for the beginnings of Christianity itself in Alexandria. One may note that this thesis reflects the modern sus-

³ See V. Tcherikover, "The Decline of the Jewish Diaspora in the Roman Period," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 14 (1963): 1–32; and J. Méléze-Modrzejewski, *Les juifs d'Égypte de Ramsès II à Hadrien* (Paris, 1997), 223–304.

⁴ These few references have been recently studied by N. Hacham, "From Splendor to Disgrace: On the Destruction of Egyptian Jewry in Rabbinic Literature," *Tarbiz* 72 (2003): 463–88 (Hebrew).

⁵ *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, II (Horowitz 95–96). Parallel text in *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai*, on Ex. 14:13 (Epstein-Melemed 56).