EARLY JUDAISM AND ITS
GRECO-ROMAN ENVIRONMENT
In a study about Abraham and the nations, a chapter on the relationship between Spartans and Jews cannot be absent, and stranger Jewish relatives than the Spartans are hardly imaginable. The connections between the two peoples, authentic or not, have often been analysed, and in my contribution I will once again look at them but limit myself in my discussion to the most recent literature, in particular the studies by Momigliano, Gruen and Jones. No new documents have turned up since the debate about the relationship started in the eighteenth century, but a fresh look can still offer some new insights, as I hope to show.

Our earliest, if indirect, source for a Jewish-Spartan relationship can be found in Hecataeus of Abdera’s treatise On Egypt. This is also the oldest surviving work on the Jews in Greek literature, even though knowledge about them was already available in Peripatetic circles. Hecataeus probably wrote his work on Egypt around 315 BCE. Jews had of course been in Egypt for many centuries, but after the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great and the consolidation of his power by Ptolemy I there was a great influx of Jewish immigrants, military and otherwise. Hecataeus, who came to Egypt in the entourage of Ptolemy, must have soon met some of those Jews in Alexandria. They will have stood out in the Egyptian society as people who were clearly non-Egyptian and non-Greek. Cohen has posed the question: “How do you know a Jew in antiquity when you see one?” The answer must have surely varied, depending on geography, but it is clear from papyri that Jews in Egypt were often

---

1 For the older literature, see the bibliography in R. Katzoff, “Jonathan and Late Sparta,” AJP 106 (1985): 485n1.