THE NAMES OF THE TRANSLATORS IN
THE LETTER OF ARISTEAS:
A STUDY IN THE DYNAMICS OF
CULTURAL TRANSITION*

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“'The names of a people are its annals in cipher’” (Leopold Zunz)

Whatever the date for the composition of the Letter of Aristeas as a whole may be, and suggestions range over a period of several centuries1), the question of the authenticity of the material used by

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1) VINCENT, Père L. H., in a detailed discussion of the topography of "Jerusalem d’apres la Lettre d’Aristee", RB 5 (1908), 520-532; 6 (1909), 355-375, arrives at the conclusion that our document was composed during the third century. SCHÜRER III/4, 611 dates the work no later than 200 BCE, and so too TRAMONTANO, R. (Italian transl. with introd. and notes), Naples, 1931, and CAHANA, A., Hasepharim-Ha-hizonim, Tel-Aviv, 1937, Vol. II, introduction to Letter.
ORLINSKY, H. M., in Crozer Quarterly 29/2 (April 1952), particularly pp. 202-203, has cogently argued for a date preceding the Maccabean uprising, and his arguments are clearly summarized by JELLICOE, S., The Septuagint and Modern Study, Oxford, 1968, 63 ff., who concurs with this date. See also, more recently, RAPPAPORT, U., “When Was the Letter of Aristeas Written”, Studies in the History of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel I (in memory of Zvi Avneri), Haifa University, 1970, 37-50 (= Mehqarim I—Hebr.). RAPPAPORT argues convincingly for a date not later than the end of the third century BCE, or at the very latest, the beginning of the second century BCE. His critical discussion of the various factors used to determine the date includes a refutation of BICKERMAN’s arguments for a later date and his own arguments that the specific parts mentioned in section 115, as well as the historical frame of reference of the author both reflect the geo-political situation of the third cent. BCE and do not fit any later period. For other suggested dates, cf. BICKERMAN, E., “Zur Datierung des Pseudo-Aristeas”, ZNTW 29 (1930), 280-298, particularly 296, who suggest a date after 145 BCE (probably quite some time later); cf. also MOTZO, B., “Aristea”, Atti della R. Accad. di Scienze di Torino 50 (1915), 202-226, 547-570. WENDLAND, P., art. “Aristeas”, Jewish Encyclopedia 2, 92ff., gives a date after 96 BCE; so too

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the authors—in this case the list of names of the translators—is a separate one.

I have shown in previous articles2) that Jewish names not only reflect a Jewish identification on the part of the name-giver, but often also provide an indication of the non-Jewish cultural milieu to which the name giver wished to belong. This was done with the aid of the study in depth of three names: Abra(h)am, Simon, and Reuben. Since two of these are represented in the list of translators found in the Letter of Aristeas, I was there obliged to devote quite some space to this onomasticon; enough, we trust, to have proven its authenticity3).

The main object of our present study is to approach this onomasticon as a document reflecting the cultural transition of the Judean aristocracy in the 4th-3rd centuries BCE, building upon the methodological assumptions and factual conclusions already expounded in our previous work. While we will bring some new material and also have to recapitulate some of the material brought there, we will not repeat the details.


2) "Jewish Names as Cultural Indicators in Antiquity: The Vogue of Certain Jewish Names is a Projection of the Surrounding non-Jewish Cultural Milieu", JSJ 7 (1976), 97-128; cf, also "Historical Conclusions Gleaned from the Names of the Jews of Elephantine," Léonenu 31/2-3 (1967), 97-106; 199-210 (Hebrew).

3) An interesting recent attempt to shed light on the question of Egyptian or Palestinian origin of the Septuagint is that of B. S. J. Isserlin, "The Names of the 72 Translators of the Septuagint (Aristeas, 47-50)", The Gaster Festschrift, Journal of the Ancient Near-Eastern Society of Columbia University 5 (1973), ed. David Marcus, who likewise bases his study inter alia on the onomastic material found in Aristeas. Arguing for at least "a Palestinian element in the LXX", he states, p. 197, that "more of the names of the translators can be matched in Palestine than in Egypt." His main argument rests on the phonetic (consonantal and vocalic) idiosyncrasies evinced in the transcriptions of the proper names in the LXX, vis-à-vis the normative forms of these names in the Hellenistic and Roman periods in Judea and Egypt respectively. He concludes (ibid.), that "we are dealing here with the result of the acceptance in Alexandria of a standard derived from outside; and there are hints that the region was Palestine."