ATTICIZING MOSES?
NUMENIUS, THE FATHERS AND THE JEWS

BY

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Numenius, the second-century disciple of Pythagoras, was the boast of Christian authors and is the friend of all modern scholars who wish to find testimonies to Jewish influences on the pagans of the later Roman world. He has been said to have known the Septuagint, to have built upon the philosophy of Philo, to have been a Jew himself: few at least have doubted the judgment of Stern, that his knowledge of Jewish Scriptures exceeded that which was displayed by any pagan of his time.1 If he was not a Jew, he lived in Apamea on the Orontes, where the proximity of a large Jewish population may have inspired the sympathy that sometimes comes with acquaintance.2 If he was not at least an adept critic of the Old Testament, then how are we to explain his exegesis of the prophets, his celebration of Moses and his acquaintance with expressions which could only have been borrowed from Holy Writ?

I have not found any passage in Numenius which convinces me that his knowledge of this nation was as great as modern scholars have supposed, and it seems to me that the Fathers have made claims for him which go far beyond any proofs that they can supply. I hope to demonstrate this by an examination of all the relevant fragments of his writings, an examination which cannot be conducted without a critical estimation of the sources in which they appear.

1. We may collect, only to note them, certain remarks which prove the interest of Numenius in the Jews, but tell us nothing of the sources to which he referred. In Fragment 1 he speaks of them, with the Persians, the Brahmins and the Egyptians, as barbarians who possess a higher wisdom than the Greeks; and Origen speaks of him (Fr. 1c) as an expositor of Moses and the prophets—a barren declaration, which is criticised below in the augmented form under which it appears in a later part of his work.

2. Fragment 56 expresses a traditional Greek reverence for the "unknown" Jewish God:1
The Egyptians, and in particular Hermes, say that [the God of the Jews] is Osiris... the Greeks that he is the Dionysus of Orpheus, since, according to their own report, there originally grew from the pillars on either side of the Temple vines of gold... Livy... says that the God who is worshipped there is an Unknown God, and following him Lucan says that the Temple in Jerusalem is that of an invisible deity. Numenius says that this God is imparticiple (ἀκοινώνητον) and the Father of all the gods, refusing to let any other be a partaker of his dignity (Lydus, De Mensibus pp. 109-10 (Wuensch).

I have quoted this passage at greater length than either Des Places or Stern, in order to show that, when it came to the Jewish temple, the Greeks had a long tradition of saying more than they understood. Numenius gives no proof of having set eyes on the Temple, like the “Greeks” who mistook its ornaments for vines (Cf. 2Kings 7): did he know more than they did of the God who dwelt within? The Jews were not devotees of Dionysus, nor (for that matter) was Jahweh called the Father of all the gods; the source of most of these fantasies is no orthodox authority, but rather some crafty apologist or self-taught sympathiser, who found in the vacant adyton one of the thousand occultations of the Greek mysteries. Even the striking word ἄκοινώνητον cannot be explained without Plato: the suggestion that it alludes to the ἄκοινώνητον ὄνομα in the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon is one that only strong supporting evidence should dispose us to entertain.4

We should also note that Lydus shows a tendency to make a gift of Scriptural vocabulary to pagans who had not the good fortune to use it. Other readers of Livy did not find an ignotus deus, and Lydus no more pretends in the case of Numenius than in that of the Latin author to be quoting the exact words of his source.5

3. Fragment 13 has often been supposed to betray a deep knowledge of Jewish thought by its unobtrusive use of the Philonic and Biblical formula “He who is” as an appellation of the First God:

"Ωσπέρ δὲ πάλιν λόγος ἐστι γεωργὸς πρὸς τὸν φυτεύοντα, ἀνὰ τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον μάλιστα ἐστιν ὁ πρῶτος θεὸς πρὸς τὸν δημιουργὸν. Ὅ μὲν γε ὁὶ σὰρμα πάσης φυσῆς σφέρει εἰς τὰ μεταλαχθάνοντα αὐτοῦ χρήματα σύμπαντα. ὁ νομοθέτης δὲ φυτεύει καὶ διανέμει καὶ μεταφυτεύει εἰς ἡμᾶς ἑκάστους τὰ ἑκείθεν προ-καταβεβημένα.

If ὁ ... ὁὶ is to be rendered, with Des Places, “celui qui est”", it is the only case in Numenius of the use of a Jewish expression which has no Platonic parallel. He never, for example, prefers ντές to δημιουργός, and even ἄκοινώνητον and νομοθέτης are Platonic terms ingeniously