

# **THE LETTER OF ARISTEAS**

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The Letter of Aristeas by H. St . J. Thackeray

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**H. ST . J. THACKERAY**

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OF ARISTEAS**



# THE LETTER OF ARISTEAS

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

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for the Jewish Historical Society of England*

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### NOTE TO THE PRESENT EDITION

At the suggestion and through the kind instrumentality of Mr. Abrahams, joint editor of the 'Jewish Quarterly Review,' the present translation of the Letter of Aristeas is reprinted from the pages of that journal (April, 1903), in the hope that there may be readers interested in Septuagint studies who will care to possess it in a separate form.

H. St. J. T.





## TRANSLATION OF THE LETTER OF ARISTEAS.



THE celebrated document, of which a new English version is here presented to the reader, professes to give a contemporary account of the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek in the time of Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-247 B. C.). It has long been recognized that the letter cannot be contemporary with the events described. The writer in various ways betrays his later date. Thus he says that the arrangements made at the Alexandrian court for the entertainment of foreigners "may still be seen in operation" (§ 182), and he describes the scrupulous care with which "all business used to be transacted by these kings" (§ 28), as though he were looking back over the history of a long dynasty of Ptolemies. He anticipates the incredulity with which his story will be received (§ 296). He is guilty of some historical inaccuracies, in making Demetrius Phalereus the friend and librarian of Philadelphus, and in his references to Menedemus (§ 201), Theopompus (§ 314), and Theodectes (§ 316). But that which chiefly arouses suspicion as to the historical character of the narrative is the apologetic tendency displayed in it. The writer is clearly a Jew of Alexandria,

not a heathen courtier as he professes to be, and his main object is to magnify the Jewish nation in the eyes of the Greek world by narrating the honour bestowed upon it by a Greek monarch and the praise accorded to it by heathen lips. This apologetic tendency is seen most clearly in the long exposition given by Eleazar of "the inner meaning of the law" (§ 171) with regard to clean and unclean food—a section which is penned with the intention of satisfying the "curiosity" which that law had excited (§ 128), and counteracting fallacious views on the subject which still found supporters although they had long been exploded (§ 144). Still, as has been said, "a work written with a tendency, with a romantic colouring, may nevertheless be trustworthy," and the problem of sifting the false from the true in this story yet awaits solution.

Recent criticism has set in the direction of rehabilitating the story here told, or at any rate a part of it. The numerous papyri of the Ptolemaic age which have been unearthed in Egypt in recent years have shown that the writer employs the titles of court officials and the technical terms connected with royal decrees and court usage with strict accuracy. The information which he gives with regard to Alexandria and the customs and institutions of the Ptolemies may be accepted as trustworthy, and may sometimes be used to supplement the information supplied by the papyri.

But the question of the date of the letter is still so far from being settled that there is a difference of more than two centuries between the earliest and the latest date assigned to it. The three dates which critics of the present day have suggested are (1) that of Schürer, who places it at about 200 B. C., i. e. little more than half a century after the time when the translation is said to have been made; (2) that of Wendland, who sets it between 96 and 63 B. C., rather nearer to the former date; (3) that of Willrich (*Judaica*, 1900), who, following Graetz, brings it down as late as the time of Caligula (after 33 A. D.). It is impossible

here to discuss the grounds on which these critics have arrived at these widely differing results. Suffice it to say that the date assigned by Willrich is almost certainly too late, while the evidence afforded by the papyri on some minor points tends to show that Schürer's date is somewhat too early. The chief reason which has induced him to assign to the work so high an antiquity is the picture here presented of the political position of Palestine and its relation to Egypt. The fortress of Jerusalem is still in the possession of the Jews, Alexandrians are allowed to enter the country and its capital without molestation, and "the Jewish people and their high priest appear as almost politically independent." This, according to Schürer, presupposes the period before the conquest of Palestine by the Seleucid dynasty in 198 B. C. as the date of writing. A further argument in favour of the early date is the supposed reference of Aristobulus (170-150 B. C.) to the Aristeas letter in a passage (ap. Eus. *P. E.* xiii. 12. 664 b) where he states that the whole law was first translated under Philadelphus through the instrumentality of Demetrius Phalereus. The authenticity of the passage has, however, been disputed. ✓

On the other hand must be set certain details which point to a date not earlier than the middle of the second century B. C. Strack<sup>1</sup> has shown that, while the honorary title ἀρχισωματοφύλαξ, in conjunction with some other title such as διοικητής or στρατηγός, is found in the papyri of the third century B. C., the use of the plural τῶν ἀρχισωματοφυλάκων, which occurs in Aristeas § 40, is not met with before about 145 B. C.<sup>2</sup> A similar instance is that of the phrase ἐν φαίηται with no dative following it (Aristeas § 32, see my note on the passage), which appears to be unattested in the papyri before 163 B. C. Again, some of the names of the Seventy (§§ 47 ff.), such as Jason, are names which

<sup>1</sup> *Rhein. Museum*, LV, 168 ff.

<sup>2</sup> The earliest instance seems to be Tebtunis Papyri, 79. 52 (about 148 B. C.).