HELLENISTIC JUDAISM

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Alexander the Great laid the foundations for a cultural and religious transformation of the ancient world. His military strategy went beyond occupying territory and instead he was able to fuse Greek culture with old oriental culture. During his campaigns he traveled with engineers, architects, scientists, philosopher and historians who established Hellenistic cities throughout the eastern half of the Mediterranean. These cities spread Greek beliefs and life style throughout the ancient world. They establish the framework for the syncretism of ancient Judaism with Hellenistic Culture. The Hellenistic period brought both innovation, as well as the peril of cultures becoming homogenous. Even though Judaism was able to maintain its distinct characteristics Hellenism still affect Jews of the ancient world. One can still observe greek influences in the Torah.

Centuries before Alexander the Great, Judaism was considered Henotheism. Henotheism acknowledges the existence of multiple gods; with the belief that every region has a supreme God. During the ancient world most cultures were Henotheism.

Between the Babylonian exile and the beginning of the Hellenistic period Judaism transitioned from Henotheism to becoming the first Monotheistic religion. Monotheist believed in the existence of only one true God. This dogma made Israel different from all other religions and cultures within the ancient Orient. This is one of many examples of what made the immersion of Greek culture and Judaism difficult.

According to the book, *Black Athena,* by Martin Bernal there are two models of Greek culture: Levantine Culture and “the extreme Aryan Model”. The first model hypothesizes that during 1500 BC both the Egyptians and the Phoenicians civilized the natives in Hellas. This brought about Greek culture and is thus, categorized as a Levantine culture. The second argues that the Greeks were descendants of Indo-Europeans that invaded Hellas (Bernal 182). When Alexander established his Empire, he quickly realized that Greek culture could not replace older and deeply rooted religions like Judaism. Two examples of this were: the Greeks inability to replace the role of religion for the whole empire and also the inefficiency of establishing a democratic city system. Instead he did two things in order to gain better and more stable control over his territory: he allowed the worship of local deities and he establishes a centralized government. The tolerance for the worship of local deities resulted in syncretism between different cultures. An example of this can be observed in Gnosticism, which blended Judaism, Christianity and Greek philosophy during 300 BC TO 300 AD (e.g Loflan Lewis, Religious Syncretism, Hellenism, and Christianity).

To spread Greek culture, Hellenistic cities (known as polis) were established within the captured territories. All these cities followed a similar framework: in the center there was a public town and a marketplace, then there was a city council, public baths, temples to worship the Greek Gods and other institutions that characterized Greek life. Besides being placed throughout the kingdom they were also interconnected by a series of roads. These road helped spread Hellenization rapidly throughout the ancient world. Gradually, the process of Hellenization would reach Jerusalem and thus, Judaism (Skarsaune 33-35)

During the Hellenistic period the Jewish community struggled with the decision of how to react to the Hellenization of Judaism to oppose or embrace it. This struggle stemmed from the repercussion of being severed from the hellenized world. Hellenistic Greece represented ‘civilization’ and was a source of prosperity bringing knowledge of science, geometry, philosophy and international trade.

The largest conflict between merging both cultures was found in the Torah and how different it was to Hellenistic beliefs. The main supporters of Hellenization desired to alter the Torah to fit into the civilized world. This obviously posed the risk of Judaism becoming a part of Hellenistic culture as a whole and getting lost in history.

Greek practices and beliefs deeply contrasted with Jewish customs, for example: circumcision and nudity (Sarksaune 31). The Greeks viewed circumcision as a mutilation of the body while the Jews saw it as a cleansing and an important aspect of their tradition. For the people of Israel circumcision held a deeper meaning observed in Genesis. “I made you the ancestor of a multitude of nation. I will make you exceedingly fruitful… and I will give you, the land where you are know an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding…You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you” (*The Harper Collin Study Bible*, Genesis 17.8-17.13). According to the Priestly source, God’s willingness to give the land of Canaan as a perpetual holding to Abraham symbolizes his trust (*The Harper Collin Study Bible*, Genesis 17.8). This promise made to Abraham is similar to the one stated by the Jahwist source, “Now the LORD said to Abraham, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you… I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you…and in you all the families shall be blessed…Then the LORD appeared to Abraham and said, ‘To your offsprings I will give this land”(*The Harper Collin Study Bible*, Genesis 12.1-12.71). The similarity between these sources lies in the promise made by God to give Abraham land for his ancestors. The J source’s emphasis on the word blessing reverses the curses and punishments cast in the initial narratives of Genesis. An important literal symbol seen in Genesis 17 is Circumcision. It not only represented the blessing given to Abraham to be fruitful but also the sign of the covenant between man and God. The change in the narratives is evident in how the Priestly source focuses on the covenant of God and Abraham and the importance of circumcision in Jewish culture. While in the Jahwist redaction emphasizes God’s blessing to Abraham and how that counteracts the curse committed by Adam and Eve at the beginning of Genesis. (*The Harper Collin Study Bible*, Genesis, 12.1-9) Circumcision is also used in a metaphoric sense when Moses at the burning bush describes himself as someone of “uncircumcised lips”. Meaning that he is not fully part of the Jewish community. For the Jews this practice defined Israel against its neighbors and marked the according to Isaiah as fit for the redeemed Jerusalem. In The Meaning of the Bible a reference is made on the non canonical book of Jubilees that states that circumcision differentiates the sad from the damed. (Knight and Levine 266-269) In Greek culture importance was given to the beauty of man. Thus, nudity was openly observed in the public bath houses as well as in the gymnasium.The Jews were used to modesty and believed in maintaining the balance between body and soul. Even though these barriers stood in the way of merging both religions some individuals within the Judaic community desired this syncretism (Skarsaune 34).

What hindered the complete immersion of Greek culture and Jewish religion was the Maccabean revolt. After the death of Alexander the Great the conquered lands were divided between two dynasties: The Seleucids in the north and the Ptolemies in the south. These emperors did not get involved in Jewish affair until Antiochus IV, who tried to force the complete integration of Judaism and Greek culture. By instigating this fusion he provoked the Maccabean revolt.(*The Harper Collin Study Bible* 1477)

When Antiochus gained power he came together with a group of Jews and made and agreement that Judah should fuse together with the empire. “‘Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentile, for since we separated from them many disasters have come upon us’ … So they built a gymnasiums in Jerusalem according to Gentile custom, and removed the signs of circumcision.”(*The Harper Collin Study Bible*, First Maccabees 1.1-1.15) In this small passage Antiochus tries to force this integration by establishing gymnasiums in Judah. These gymnasiums were used as both a place of exercise and a location of theological discussion and scientific education and thus, were an essential part of Greek culture. At the time, not all Jews approved of Jewish Hellenization. Those that approved most of the hellenization of Judaism was the upperclass and those again were mostly the common people. This resulted in rising tensions between those in favor and those against this fusion. The strain increased when Antiochus decided to plunder the sanctuary, force Jews to give up their religion and then defiled the temple by putting an image of a foreign deity in the altar. “The King wrote to his kingdom that all should be one people, and that all should give up their particular customs… and he directed them to follow customs strange to the land, to forbid burnt offering and sacrifices and drink offerings in the sanctuary, to profane sabbaths and festivals, to defile the sanctuary.”(*The Harper Collin Study Bible,* first Maccabees 1.41-1.49) The act of abolishing sabbaths, festivals and the sacrifices was a direct effort of Antiochus to abolish the distinction between Jews and the rest of his empire. Antiochus IV set in place a series of reforms in order to bring Judaism into his empire and reform the religion. In the book, *The Anatomy of Maccabean Revolution* the reforms are separated into three: the replacement of the Torah as the Jewish Law, introduction of the Gymnasium and the third came under Menelaus who intended to abolish Jewish particularism (Harrington 94). Menelaus was the General sent by the King to enforce his decree. According to Maccabees 1 when he and his men arrive in Modein to enforce the laws set by the King, they encounter resistance from Mattathais. Mattathias was a well respected priest and an important figure within the Jewish community. When the emperors solders try to establish a shrine and encourage the worship of Zeus, Mattathais opposes them and declares that he and his sons will forever follow the covenant of his ancestor. When a Jew tries to sacrifice in the Alter, Mattathais kills the Jews and thus, incites a rebellion. (This revolt would later result in the rededication of the Temple which is know yearly celebrated as the festival of Hanukkah)He later escapes with his sons and organizes a militia movement to fight for Judaism. After his death his sons would continue his legacy and would one day establish their own independent state. This book is part of the Septuagint originally written in Hebrew and then translated to Greek. (First Maccabees 1.62-2.26) The author of this book is anonymous but is believed to have been born during or close after these events occurred because of his depth in knowledge of the geography and detail in the story. ([Crawford Howell Toy](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/contribs/612), [George A. Barton](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/contribs/387), [Joseph Jacobs](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/contribs/551), [Israel Abrahams](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/contribs/291), Maccabees Books of, *Jewish Encyclopedia*.The Kopelman Foundation) Although, Mattathias does stop the complete emersion of Judaism with Hellenism, Hellenistic culture still greatly affected Judaism at the time. This can be observed in how Greek philosophy was used to interpret meaning within the Torah.

Hellenism introduced the idea that humanity had to live life centered on divine reason: the law of both nature and ethics. The Jews instead of opposing this concept modified and applied it to the law of Moses. The torah became the representation of reason and logos on earth and was thus, God’s preexistent wisdom. They correlated the Torah with wisdom and established it as the law that not only created the world but also set the norms humanity had to live by. (Skarsaune 33-34)

This play on logos and wisdom is described and better explained in the Hebrew bible through the contrast of two roles: Women Wisdom and Women Folly. The reason that a female role is used could be because of the influence of the Hellenistic period. The greeks also believed that the goddess Athena embodied wisdom. In *The Meaning of the Bible* three contrast are made between Women Wisdom and Folly to give a better description on what it means to be wise. Two passages are given to bring to light these contrast. The first passage speaks of Wisdom and how she cries out in the street and city gates, “‘How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple’” (1:20-22). On the other hand the second passage, is about Women Folly who loudly calls those who pass by, “‘You who are simple turn in here’”(9:13-17). Both women refer to the male audience when they use the word ‘simple,’ both offer something and they both use the language of persuasion. Yet Wisdom women offers knowledge and the threat of punishment while folly offers pleasure as well as the negative consequences. The second contrast is done through the comparison between the faithful women and the temptress. The loose women that traps the naive young man and promises passion when her husband is not home. While the faithful women waits at home for her husband to come back. Women folly is foolish and fickle while the women wisdom is valuable and loyal. The final contrast is represented by the two types of wife: the contentious and the good wife. The contentious is described to be, “worse than living in the desert, a continual dripping and a un-restrainable wind”. On the other hand the Good Wife is capable, powerful, wealthy and brave in battle. For the Hebrews wisdom mean ‘chochmah’ and this indicates skill as well as strength and purpose. At the time these were the characteristics that describe the good wife as well as what it meant to be wise. For them wisdom was about skill, virtue, knowledge and reliability. (Knight and Levine, 437-439)

The Hellenistic period brought changes in how the Torah was read, interpreted and communicated. This can be observed in the “Tradition of the Elder” . The Tradition of the Elder was a method used by the Greek philosophy schools to give further authority to the doctrine. It would cite the names of those who had transmitting this knowledge by order of chronology. An example given in the book, In the Shadow of the temple is, “Rabbi X said in the name of Rabbi, Y who in the tradition from Rabbi Z”.

The influence can also be observed in how the Torah was communicated. The greatest way to observe the close contact that existed between both culture is through language. At the time Greek was the English of the ancient world it was employed by authors and spoken by the majority of the population. This made the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek very practical. With the creation of the Septuagint more people could read the Torah and therefore give insight and different perspectives. The change of Hebrew to Greek brought what seemed irrelevant changes in dialect and format that would later create different interpretations.(Skarsaune 36-38)

The coming of Alexander the Great was a pivot point in the Judaic religion. It brought about the risk of the disappearance of Judaism within Hellenism. The way that Jews were able to keep their distinction was by holding on to their roots and to what made them different and unique. The Maccabean revolt is an example of the opposition of the Jews to their incorporation to the Greek life. Even though they were able to maintain their uniqueness the influence of this time period is still observed in the format and interpretation of the Torah.

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