

Judaism and Hellenism

A PRESENTATION BY THEO PAVLIDIS

1

It is all Greek to Me

- **Hellen** (Ἕλληγ) is the Greek word for **Greek**, and **Hellenism** refers to the culture that was prominent in the Middle East around 300 BCE to 400 CE, the **Hellenistic period**.
- The Greek culture continued to be dominant, even after the rise of the Roman Empire.

2

Greek Influences on Judaism - 1

- The word **Synagogue** is Greek, meaning **Gathering** (Συναγωγή).
- The Passover **Seder** ritual is arranged like a (classical) Greek Symposium, a social gathering mixing drinking with an intellectual discourse.

3

Greek Influences on Judaism - 2

- The word **Afikomen** is derived from the Greek **Afikomeni** (Αφικόμενοι) meaning **Arriving Guests**.
- What is the origin of "Do not eat the Afikomen?"

4

Greek Influences on Christianity

- Christianity is a religion that started as a Jewish sect; thus, it was also influenced by Greek culture.
- The English translation of the Hebrew word **Messiah** (מָשִׁיחַ) is **Anointed**.
- The Greek word for **Anointed** is **Χριστός** anglicized as **Christ**.

5

Assimilation

- Most Jews of the Hellenistic era did not know Hebrew.
- **Septuagint**: Translation of the Torah into Greek to make it accessible to the many Jews who could not read Hebrew.

6

Jews, Greeks and Romans - 1

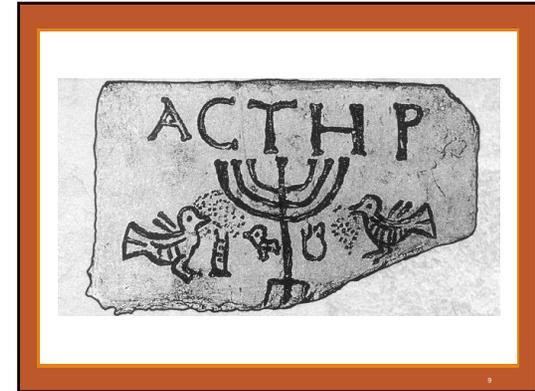
- A **Jew** was a person who followed the religion of Judaism without having to speak Hebrew or live in the land of Israel.
- A **Greek** was someone who spoke Greek and, possibly, followed certain cultural customs. It did not imply adherence to the religion of the Olympian deities or an affiliation with a state.

7

Jews, Greeks and Romans - 2

- The Roman Empire developed for the first time in history the concept of citizenship that could be acquired legally without any presumptions on ethnic origin.
- Thus, someone could be a **Jew** by religion, a **Greek** by language, and a **Roman** by citizenship. (One famous person who was all three was **Paul of Tarsus**.)

8



9

Jewish Museum of Rome

- A good place to appreciate the integration of Greek and Jewish culture.
- Ancient tombstones, all of them in Greek.
- In a few of them you can see a menorah.
- You must read the inscriptions to realize that they are Jewish Tombstones.
- For example, the word ΑΡΧΙΣΥΝΑΓΩΓΟΣ (head of the Synagogue) can be found in several.

10

Spread of Judaism

- In that era, not only the number of Greeks peaked, so did the number of Jews.
- Josephus: "The inhabitants of both Greek and barbarian cities evinced a great zeal for Judaism."
- There was active proselytization.

11

What was the Attraction of Judaism?

The Ten Commandments, that were way **ahead of their time**. For example:

- Prohibiting **coveting** (and not just stealing).
- Introduction of a **day of rest**. (Break the daily grind.)
- Prohibition of **graven images**. (God is not to be associated with a physical object.)

Such concepts are absent from other ancient writings.

12

The End of the Era - 1

- At the end of the fourth century CE Judaism was quite different than at the start of the Hellenistic period, late in the 4th century BCE.
- The start of the 5th century CE marks the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire and the severe persecution of all other religions started.

13

13

The End of the Era - 2

- Judaism is the only one of the Hellenistic era religions to survive with a significant number of members, but it entered a new phase.
- Therefore, the Judaism that developed during the fifteen hundred years of persecutions had to be different from what it existed before the fifth century BCE.

14

14

A Deep Question

- If Judaism has changed so much over the centuries what are its invariants?
- Clearly, the Torah is foremost but its interpretation has varied so part of the question may be rephrased: "What interpretations of the Torah have stayed the same through the centuries?"

15

15

When Conversion was Outlawed

- The Hellenistic period was a period of growth for Judaism. Most of that growth came from conversions but conversion into Judaism was **outlawed** in the fourth century CE and became **punishable by death** in the fifth.
- Conversion into Judaism is still against the law in several European countries. (Such laws do not single out Judaism: they simply forbid the conversion of anyone who is a member of the state religion.)

16

16

Concluding Questions

- Are conditions in North America such that Judaism can restore its attitude toward conversion that existed during the Hellenistic period?
- More generally, are conditions in North America like those in the Hellenistic period as far as Judaism is concerned?

17

17

Bibliography

- L. I. Levine, *Judaism & Hellenism in Antiquity* (Univ. of Washington Press, 1998).
- Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East, A brief History of the last 2000 years* (Touchtone, 1995); pp. 30-32 and elsewhere.
- *Encyclopedia Judaica*, (2nd edition, Tomson Gale publishers, 2007). Articles on "Proselytes," vol. 16, pp. 587-594 and "Europe," vol. 6, pp. 554-555.

18

18