

Judaism and Hellenism

A PRESENTATION BY THEO PAVLIDIS

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It is all Greek to Me

- **Hellen (Ελλην)** is a Greek word for **Greek**, with focus on language and customs (not geography).
- **Hellenism** refers to the culture that was prominent in the Middle East from around 300 BCE to 400 CE (even under Roman rule), the **Hellenistic period**.

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Greek Influences on Judaism

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

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DO NOT EAT THE AFIKOMEN

- Greek symposia concluded with the arrival of guests (Αφηκομενοι) and heavy drinking.
- The rabbis stated that the seder should not include that custom and that directive evolved through the millennia to its modern form.

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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** (משיח) is **Anointed**.
- The Greek word for **Anointed** is **Χριστος** anglicized as **Christ**.

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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.

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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.

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Jewish Influences on Greek Culture

- The contemporary names of the days of the week in Greek (except for Sunday) are translations of the Jewish names.
- The most obvious case is Saturday that is called **Σάββατο** (Sabbat), but this is also true for the rest.
- See Table.

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Days of the Week

In English	Hebrew / Greek
Sunday	First / Lord's Day
Monday	Second
Tuesday	Third
Wednesday	Fourth
Thursday	Fifth
Friday	Sixth / Preparation
Saturday	Shabbat

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Spread of Judaism

- In the Hellenistic 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.

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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.

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Circumcision

- **Some scholars claim that conversions were not complete because they might not have included circumcision.**
- **On the other hand, ancient texts mention a “reversal of circumcision” procedure to enable Jews to take part in the pagan athletic events.**

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The End of the Era - 1

- **At the end of the fourth century CE Judaism was quite different from what it was 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 start of the severe persecution of all other religions.**

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The End of the Era - 2

The Judaism that developed during the fifteen hundred years of persecutions had to be different from what had existed before the fifth century BCE as well different from what had existed during the Hellenistic era.

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When Conversion was Outlawed

- The Hellenistic period was a period of growth for Judaism. Most of that growth came from conversions.
- However, conversion into Judaism was **outlawed** in the fourth century CE and became **punishable by death** in the fifth.
- Under such circumstances, the Jews themselves had to discourage conversion into their religion.

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An Intriguing Question

- **Are conditions in North America such that Judaism can restore its attitude toward conversion that existed during the Hellenistic period?**
- **Maybe, but do not expect results like those of the Hellenistic period.**

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The Triumph of Jewish Ideas

- **The ten commandments are already universally accepted!**
- **Both Christianity and Islam have their roots in Judaism.**

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On the Connection between Judaism and Islam

“ ... Muhammad viewed Christians and Jews (both of whom he referred to as "People of the Book") as natural allies, part of the Abrahamic religions, sharing the core principles of his teachings, and anticipated their acceptance and support. [Muslims, like Jews, were at that time praying towards Jerusalem.](#)”

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Resources on the Web

- **Go to theopavlidis.com.**
- **On the bottom left corner of the page there is a link labeled [Jefferson's Ferry Material \(Oct. 2021\)](#)**
- **Click on it to get to a link for the material of this talk.**

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