

THE LETTER OF ARISTEAS
August 15, 2014

Shabbat shalom!

On the night of November 15, in the year 1570, a terrible earthquake struck the city of Ferrara, in northern Italy. With more than 2,000 aftershocks extending over a period of months, the city was largely destroyed, although the death toll, at about 70, was surprisingly small. If you were to visit Ferrara today, you would still see iron bracing around many buildings, testifying to the lasting effects of the quake, more than 400 years ago.

Ferrara in those days had a strong Jewish community – a protected community safe from persecution and inquisition, a community that thrived with Jewish commerce and Jewish scholarship. Indeed, Ferrara had been home to the world’s first Jewish university devoted not only to Jewish studies, but also math, science, literature and the classics. One Jewish scholar there, Azariah de Rossi, was the first true Jewish historian, pursuing studies that would ultimately ruin his reputation, because he used the techniques of scholarship rather than literalist belief in tradition, discovering, for example, that the traditional rabbinic chronology of the Bible was filled with errors.

When the earthquake struck, de Rossi and his family, along with thousands of others, had to flee their homes in Ferrara. They set up a makeshift camp outside of town, and found themselves sharing the space with a priest. With little else to do, this priest and de Rossi struck up a friendship, and held wide-ranging discussions about their traditions, their history and their literature.

And so in due course, the priest asked De Rossi whether he had the original Hebrew text of the Letter of Aristeas. But no, De Rossi only knew of the Letter in Greek, and told the priest that despite its Jewish authorship, the Letter was unknown and unstudied in the Jewish world – indeed, rejected by traditional Judaism – for its subversive message. Azariah then became the first Jew to translate and publish the Letter of Aristeas into Hebrew, and write about it for a Jewish audience; ultimately, De Rossi’s writings earned him excommunication by the leading rabbis of the day, and a ban on his books that lasted hundreds of years, but that’s another story.

The Letter of Aristeas is one of the texts in the Jewish Pseudepigrapha – literally “secret” or “false” writings that tell us a great deal about Judaism just before the Christian era, but from the perspective of rabbinic tradition are considered “out of bounds” because their message didn’t tow the party line. There are hundreds of such writings; I’ve selected five for this year’s Summer Sermon Series, and this is the last.

Aristeas was a Greek courtier – not Jewish – in the court of the Egyptian King, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, in the 3rd century BCE. He lived in Alexandria, home of a great Jewish community and also home to the world’s greatest library – a library that was one of the wonders of the ancient world, with hundreds of thousands of scrolls, study rooms, public function rooms and professional librarians. The very first description we have of the great Library of Alexandria is from this Letter of Aristeas. It’s too bad the library was burned down after just a couple of hundred years.

Aristeas, writing to his brother, records that the chief librarian Demetrios wanted to fill a major hole in the library’s collections, by acquiring the Scripture of the Jews in a Greek translation, so that everyone would be able to read it. Since the only Jewish writings then were in Hebrew, he proposed to the king to commission a translation into Greek, and the king agreed, with great enthusiasm.

Not only did the king agree, but he sent couriers to Jerusalem, inviting the high priest there to provide 72 scholars – six from each of the twelve tribes – to come to Alexandria to do the work.

Such things cost money. As part of the deal, the king released thousands of Jewish prisoners and slaves then being held in Egypt, and the courier to Jerusalem brought lavish gifts and much silver to donate to the Temple. And so the deal was struck, the scholars came to Egypt, and the work began.

Aristeas describes in detail the lavish banquets, the public symposia that demonstrated the wisdom of these Jewish sages, and how they were finally secluded for 72 days to finish their work – the first translation of sacred Jewish text into another language. Perhaps you have heard the term “Septuagint,” as the Greek translation is called, from a Greek root meaning “Seventy,” the approximate number of scholars.

When the new translation of Torah was read to the leaders of the Jewish community, they declared that the translation was perfect – even more perfect,

somehow, than the original Hebrew! They declared that the translation was so perfect that no word should ever be changed, and this was the text that must be used, now and for all time.

You can see why the Letter was so controversial – for the story it told, like so many others in the Pseudepigrapha, was the stuff of revolution. Last week I mentioned how the Jews in Alexandria had built their own rival temple with their own priests and sacrifices; now this same community, highly acculturated to the world of Greek philosophy and culture, was turning its back on the Hebrew of Torah and declaring that Greek would be the language of choice.

One might ask a legitimate question: Why are we even discussing a letter from one Greek non-Jew living in Egypt to another Greek non-Jew living in Egypt? Aside from references to Torah, how can we even call this a work of Jewish literature?

Good question. Scholars have pretty much come to the conclusion that the Letter is a forgery. Certain historical errors and anachronisms, as well as the author's intimate knowledge of Jewish ritual, the functioning of the priesthood and the Temple in Jerusalem, have led scholars to conclude that the Letter could only have been written by an Alexandrian Jew living about a century later – telling a mythic story of how the Greek text, already circulating, came to be.

Like so much else written in this period, the Letter of Aristeas is a propaganda piece – a polemic. It was put into the mouth of a heathen precisely to show how attractive Judaism could be – even to courtiers and kings. The way the king praises the Jewish scholars is so effusive that it shows how this work is intended for gentile readers. Even the Greek god Zeus is described as just another name for the one God of Judaism. Actually, the most likely scenario is that the piece was written as a missionary tract – a Jewish missionary tract to proselytize Judaism to the gentile world of Alexandria.

Listen to this account of the King of Egypt, and how he rewarded the 72 translators, at the end of the story:

“When these proceedings were reported to the king he rejoiced greatly. The whole work was read out to him also, and he marveled exceedingly at the intellect of the lawgiver. He said, ‘How has it not occurred to any of the historians or poets to make mention of such enormous achievements?’ And he said, ‘This Law is holy and has come into being through God.’

“And the king bowed deeply and gave orders that great care be taken of the books and that they be watched over reverently. He also urged the translators to make visits to him, after they had been restored to Judaea. Then he ordered that preparations for their sending off be seen to treating the men munificently. To each he gave three costumes of the highest quality, and two talents of gold, and a sideboard of a talent’s weight, and complete furnishings. And he wrote a letter to the high priest in Jerusalem that he accounted it a privilege to associate with cultured men, and would rather lavish his wealth upon such men than on vanities.”

There was a time, in other words, when Jewish leaders reached out to the larger world; translated their texts into the prevailing language of the day, and had as open and broad-minded approach as Reform Judaism does in our day.

Those days came to an end. After the advent of Christianity, the early Christian church turned its back on Judaism (and vice versa), and turned toward Rome to ally itself with Roman power. Rome crushed the Jewish state, burned down the Temple in Jerusalem and destroyed Jerusalem itself. The independent Alexandrian community was wiped out by the Roman Emperor Trajan. And Judaism itself turned inward, spurning the outside world, closing the door on conversion, and focusing not on the world of society but on the world of texts and rabbinic law. The Letter of Aristeas spoke of and to a world that had disappeared, and the legend was only preserved in later Christian retellings until a certain priest in Ferrara shared the story with a 16th century Italian scholar. The story of the Letter teaches us, once again, that Judaism has a wondrous history and literature, fascinating and diverse, or as one teaching has it in the Talmud, when discussing the world of Jewish learning, “Turn it, and turn it again, for everything is in it.”