Letter of Aristeas 1-40 and Judean National Identity (Prolegomenon)

Francis Borchardt, University of Helsinki

OTSEM II (Göttingen 2009)

The Letter of Aristeas has long been viewed as a work of Jewish apologetics. While there has been nothing like a consensus on the intended audience of the book, or the brand of Judaism presented in the narrative, scholars agree that the author is presenting his ideal form of Judaism. The one point scholars seem to be in agreement on, is that the depiction presented by the Letter of Aristeas is not a of nationalist Judaism.

This paper challenges that prevailing opinion by offering a definition and model of the nation and national identity from the social sciences and applying the evidence of the Letter of Aristeas to that model. The study presumes that the definitions used by previous scholars are either unclear, incorrect, or out-of-date. When a more social scientific analysis of the evidence is performed, the hypothesis is that a different result might be reached. The result is compelling. When examined in this way, using many textual examples, it becomes apparent that the Judaism of Aristeas is indeed based on the concept of the community as a nation. Though that nation might not be one that despises foreigners, isolates itself from the world, and forcibly places its values on others, it meets the more flexible and realistic definition of such a community.

This paper is part of a larger project, which attempts to trace when and how the concept of the community (Israel/Judea) changed in the Hellenistic period. In this study I examine a wide variety of works written during this time, both those stemming from Judea, and from the Diaspora, to find the way each author defines the community. For some of these works, such as that of Ben Sira, a diachronic analysis is needed, and each layer or section needs to be investigated separately. In others, such as the Letter of Aristeas, where there is relative uniformity, the whole of the text can be examined. In all of these texts though, the models and definitions from the social sciences are used to outline the form of the community. It is our hypothesis that the rise in cultural awareness, mass communication through a common tongue, and increased exchange of information contributed to a more ethno-historical, and hence, national concept of

communities throughout the Hellenistic world, and the Jews were no different. Contrary to prior studies on Second Temple nationalism, this study does not view the Hasmonean revolution and the persecutions, which preceded them as the cause of such sentiments, but as harnessing those emotions that were already present among the community. The study also does not presume that this concept of the community was universal or uniform. Certain texts may display no evidence of the national identity of the community, while others might argue for a national identity, but one entirely different from that manifested in Judea under the Hasmoneans.

As this paper reveals, the Letter of Aristeas appears to fall into the latter group. The national identity depicted by the work holds Judeans to be an important people, and a necessary and respected population within the Hellenistic universe, but does not appear to feel the need to convert that whole universe to their own worldview. It is the national identity of a people who are a minority in their own surroundings. Whether this was typical of all Alexandrian conceptions and the Hasmonean view typical of all Jerusalemite remains to be tested.