

On the Text of the *Letter of Aristeas* §168*

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An important part of the *Letter of Aristeas* is the defense or explanation of the Jewish law undertaken by the high priest Eleazar (§§128-71). In this discourse, Eleazar is especially concerned to make clear the deeper significance of the laws about clean and unclean foods. He appeals to the symbolic or allegorical meaning of these rules, showing that they generally hint at or imply some moral teaching. In concluding his remarks (§168), he explains to the visitors from Alexandria that his aim has been to demonstrate that πάντα κεκανόνισται πρὸς δικαιοσύνην καὶ οὐδὲν εἰκὴ κατατέτακται διὰ τῆς γραφῆς οὐδὲ μυθωδῶς (Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 8.9.34; B (Parisinus gr. 129); θυμωδῶς codd. rel.).¹

Modern editors and translators have universally endorsed the reading μυθωδῶς.² The main reason for this seems to be that parallels for this form of expression are attested in other Judaeo-Hellenistic writers. Of particular importance is the Jewish philosopher Aristobulus, also of the second century, who tells 'King Ptolemy' that he must reach a 'physical' or allegorical understanding of the Mosaic writings (cf. *Ep. Arist.* 143, 171), and avoid 'mythical' conceptions.³ Similarly, both Philo and Josephus tell us that an important difference between Moses and pagan writers is that the former steers clear of 'myth'.⁴

* In this article, the abbreviations of all modern works, and of the works of Philo and Josephus, are those of S.M. Schwertner, *Theologische Realenzyklopädie: Abkürzungsverzeichnis*², Berlin 1994.

¹ For the text and the manuscripts, see the editions of H. St J. Thackeray, *apud* H.B. Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*², Cambridge 1914, and A. Pelletier, *Lettre d'Aristée à Philocrate*, SC 89, Paris 1962.

² The reading of Eusebius and codex B has been adopted by all of the editors and translators cited in E. Schürer et al., *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (revised English edition) iii.1, Edinburgh 1986, pp. 685-6, and by the following translators/annotators not listed there: C. Kraus Reggiani, Rome 1979; N. Fernández Marcos, in A. Díez Macho, ed., *Apócrifos del Antiguo Testamento* ii, Madrid 1983; R.J.H. Shutt, in J.H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* ii, Garden City, NY, 1985; F. Calabi, Milan 1995.

³ *Apud* Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 8.10.1-3; cf. N. Walter, *Der Thoraausleger Aristobulos*, TU 86, Berlin 1964, pp. 59-60, 100, 135 with n. 4; C.R. Holladay *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors* iii, *Aristobulus*, SBL.TT 39, Atlanta 1995, p. 64.

⁴ Philo, *Op.* 1-2; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.15, 22-3.

When one examines these parallels closely, however, one finds a certain lack of correspondence. For there was a distinction in Judaeo-Hellenistic thought between the narrative and the legislative components of the Pentateuch,⁵ and in the other denials of the presence of 'myth' in the works of Moses, that term and cognate terminology is generally used with reference to narrative passages which might appear as unbelievable or false, such as anthropomorphic descriptions of God.⁶ This material would of course qualify as 'myth' according to standard Greek definitions.⁷ In the *Letter of Aristeas*, on the other hand, if the term *μυθωδῶς* is used in close contrast to the allegorical interpretation of the food laws, it would refer simply to a 'literal' or 'simple' understanding of those laws. Such an understanding of the laws does not imply the presence of myth, so it is strange the Eleazar would make such a denial. Indeed, this problem is no doubt the circumstance that explains why the more careful students of the text have put forward translations which stray somewhat from the literal sense of the word: P. Wendland renders 'leichtfertig', and H.T. Andrews, 'without due reason'.⁸

More than one approach to this difficulty is available. On the one hand, it is possible that the term *μυθωδῶς* is to be understood with reference to the narrative portions of the Pentateuch, as is assumed by R. Tramontano.⁹ In this case, Eleazar will be summarizing his discussion in a more general way, and harking back to his contrast of the monotheism of the Jewish 'law' (including its non-legislative components) with the polytheism of the Greeks and their 'myth-makers'.¹⁰

On the other hand, both the immediate context of the passage and more importantly, the specific vocabulary of Eleazar in this sentence imply that he is making reference to the *legislative* component of the Pentateuch. The connotations of the word *κεκαρόνισται* are obvious, and different compound forms of

⁵ See Philo, *VitMos.* 2.46-7; *Praem.* 1-2; cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 1.18.

⁶ Aristobulus, *apud* Eusebium, *Praep.ev.* 8.10.1-17; Philo, *Op.* 156-7; *Gig.* 58; *Conf.* 1-14; *Fug.* 121; Josephus, *loc. cit.* (n.4; note esp. the use of *πράξεις* in *Ant.* 1.15 and 1.18). For more on this issue, see my article, 'The Literary Genres of the Pentateuch as Seen from the Greek Perspective: The Testimony of Philo of Alexandria' to appear in: *The Studia Philonica Annual* 9, 1997.

⁷ For a good short survey of such definitions, see R.M. Grant, *The Earliest Lives of Jesus*, New York 1961, pp. 121-2; for more detail, see G. Rispoli, *Lo spazio del verisimile*, Naples 1988.

⁸ Wendland in E. Kautzsch, ed., *Die Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen des Alten Testaments* ii, Tübingen 1900, p. 18; Andrews in R.H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* ii, Oxford 1913, p.110. Cf. now F. Siegert, *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* i.1, ed. M. Sæbø, Göttingen 1996, p. 151.

⁹ *La Lettera di Aristeo a Filocrate*, Naples 1931, p. 160.

¹⁰ §§ 131-7. As parallels to § 131, one could cite Philo, *VitMos.* 2.47; *Praem.* 2; cf. *Abr.* 1.

the verb *τάσσω* are used throughout the discourse of Eleazar, and always in connection with the rules and norms established by Moses.¹¹ In other words, the denial of the presence of myth does appear to refer to the legal enactments of the Pentateuch. While such a denial would be, as indicated, highly unusual in Judaeo-Hellenistic apologetics, it makes perfect sense in a patristic context. For because of the influence of certain passages in the Pastoral Epistles, especially the Epistle to Titus 1:14, where a warning is issued against 'Jewish myths' and the 'commands of men', the term 'mythical' came to be applied more broadly to any 'literal' understanding of biblical texts, including those which would not include incredible or false narrative elements. This usage is particularly well attested in Origen, who employs the word 'myth' and related terminology to indicate legal passages understood only in a literal sense, without the allegorical meaning.¹² The usage is also apparent, however, in later patristic sources.¹³ Now, it is clear from the manner in which Eusebius introduces the extract from the *Letter of Aristeas* that his primary purpose in citing the passage is to highlight the non-literal exposition of the law attested therein (*Praep. ev.* 8.8.56-7; cf. 8.9.38; 8.10.18-9). In view of this intention, it would hardly be surprising if Eusebius relied on the terminology of his own literary milieu if he found his text difficult or corrupt, and substituted, even semi-consciously, *μυθωδῶς* for *θυμωδῶς*.

This latter term, attested almost unanimously in the direct tradition, is not as difficult as it might seem to be. However, it should not be rendered 'capriciously', as it is by H. St J. Thackeray.¹⁴ Rather, one should interpret the passage to mean that nothing in the law has been prescribed in a spirit of anger or vengeance. Such a view is in perfect accord with the sentiment which the author expresses later, that the king must avoid wrath (*θυμός*), and govern his realm as God governs the world, *μετ'εὐμενείας καὶ χωρὶς ὀργῆς ἀπάσης*.¹⁵

¹¹ *Ep. Arist.* 144, 147, 162 (note here also *μηθὲν εἰκῆ*), 170. These examples show that a broader understanding of the term *κατατέτακται*, as suggested by Tramontano, loc. cit. (n. 9), is unwarranted.

¹² See H. de Lubac, *Histoire et esprit, Theol(P)* 16, Paris 1950, pp. 118-20. Of the passages cited by him, note esp. *Contra Cels.* 2.6; *Hom. in Lev.* 3.3; *Hom. in Gen.* 3.6; 13.3.

¹³ See esp. the following interpretations of the term 'myth' as it appears in Pastoral Epistles: Ambrosiaster, *Comm. in Tit.* 1:14; J. Chrysostom, *Hom. in I Tim.* 12.2 (PG 62.559; ed. F. Field, Oxford 1861, p. 95); Theodoret, *Interpret. in I Tim.* 4:7 (PG 82.813c). See also Jerome, *Comm. in Am.* 1 (2:12); and perhaps Basil, *Ep.* 263.4; 265.2.

¹⁴ In his translation of the text, *The Letter of Aristeas*, London 1917, p. 56, n. 4.

¹⁵ §§253-4; cf. §§188, 192, 207-8. It should be noted in this context that the Stoics defined *ὀργή* as *ἐπιθυμία τιμωρίας τοῦ ἡδικηκέναι δοκούντος* (SVF iii, fr. 397; cf. frs 395-6, 398), and *θυμός* is viewed sometimes in a similar way, as *ὄρεξις ἀντιτιμωρήσεως* (SVF iii, fr. 416). In Stoic sources *θυμός* is more often seen as a

Indeed, the importance of this and related ideals such as φιλανθρωπία and mercy in the entire philosophical outlook of the *Letter of Aristeas* has often been emphasized.¹⁶ And it is only natural that the law of Moses, including the symbolism of the ritual law, would follow these same principles.¹⁷

Finally, the likelihood of a substitution of μυθωδῶς for θυμωδῶς on the part of Eusebius becomes even more evident when it is observed that the change is the result of the transposition of only two consonants, an extremely common error.¹⁸ Such an error is neither 'significant' nor 'conjunctive', and the presence of μυθωδῶς in B, a manuscript which dates to the twelfth or thirteenth century, does not confirm the reading of Eusebius, but simply indicates that a later scribe fell into a similar error.¹⁹ Whether he did so semi-consciously, as Eusebius may have done, and in tune with the tendency in the entire B group to provide a more readable text,²⁰ or whether the error is simply mechanical, is a question that need not concern us here.

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form of ὁργή (*SVF* iii, frs. 394-8), but the two terms were not always clearly distinguished, esp. in biblical Greek and more popular usage; see F. Büchsel, s.v. θυμός, *ThWNT* 3, 1938, p. 168; G. Indelli in his edition of Filodemo, *L'ira*, Naples 1988, pp. 235-6.

¹⁶ See O. Michel, 'Wie spricht der Aristeasbrief über Gott?', *ThStKr* 102, 1930, p. 305; G. Boccaccini, 'La Sapienza dello Pseudo-Aristea', in A. Vivian, ed., *Biblische und judaistische Studien*, FS P. Sacchi = *JudUm* 29, Frankfurt am Main 1990, pp. 143-76, esp. 152-9.

¹⁷ Cf. A. Terian, 'Some Stock Arguments for the Magnanimity of the Law in Hellenistic Jewish Apologetics', *Jewish Law Association Studies* 1, 1985, pp. 141-9.

¹⁸ See L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*³, Oxford 1991, pp. 229-30; cf. also D. Young, 'Some Types of Scribal Error in Manuscripts of Pindar', *GRBS* 6, 1965, pp. 256-7.

¹⁹ Contrast the reasoning and explanation of Pelletier (n. 1), p. 25. One should rather place §168 among the cases listed by him on pp. 26ff.

²⁰ See Thackeray (n. 1), pp. 536, 543; cf. p. 547: 'in a few instances where one or two members only of the group agree with Eusebius, this appears to be due to a fortuitous coincidence in [attempted, A.K.] emendation.'