

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus, Session 6, The Jews under Greek Rule

Abstract:

This source explores the historical and cultural experiences of the **Jewish people under Greek rule**, specifically highlighting the transition from **Ptolemaic to Seleucid control**. While the **Ptolemies** initially allowed Jews religious autonomy despite heavy taxation, the **Seleucids** later introduced a more proactive policy of **Hellenization** by encouraging Greek architecture, language, and governance. Dr. Anthony Tomasino argues that while the Jewish elite and those in the **Diaspora** adopted various Greek customs, the majority of Jews in **Judea** maintained a primarily **cosmetic** relationship with Hellenism. Internal shifts did occur in areas like **household furnishings, marriage customs**, and the adoption of **astrology**, yet these changes rarely undermined core religious identities. Ultimately, the text illustrates a complex balancing act where the **Jewish soul** remained rooted in ancestral traditions despite centuries of significant Mediterranean influence.

Briefing Document:

Jewish Life and Governance Under Hellenistic Rule

Executive Summary

Following the death of Alexander the Great, the Jewish people in Judea navigated a complex geopolitical landscape defined by the rivalries of the Diadochi—Alexander's successors. Initially governed by the Egyptian-based Ptolemaic Kingdom and later by the Syrian-based Seleucid Empire, Judean society experienced varying degrees of Hellenization.

The Ptolemies operated a highly exploitative but religiously indifferent administration, characterized by the "tax farming" system which empowered local

elites like the Tobiad family. In contrast, the Seleucids adopted a paternalistic approach, actively incentivizing the adoption of Greek culture, architecture, and governance through the establishment of *poleis* (Greek-style cities).

While the upper classes and Diaspora Jews engaged deeply with Greek language and philosophy, the Jewish population in Judea largely maintained its ancestral traditions. Most Hellenistic influences in Judea were "cosmetic"—affecting architecture, clothing styles, and dining habits—rather than "substantial" shifts in core religious or ethical frameworks. However, notable changes did occur in family structures, such as the shift from the "bride price" to the "dowry" system and the eventual adoption of Greek-style astrology within Jewish contexts.

Geopolitical Transitions: Ptolemies and Seleucids

After the Wars of the Diadochi (321–301 BC), the Near East was partitioned among three primary powers: Lysimachus in Asia Minor, Seleucus in Mesopotamia and Syria, and Ptolemy in Egypt and Palestine.

The Ptolemaic Era (c. 301–200 BC)

The early Ptolemaic rulers maintained a rigid social hierarchy. In Egypt, native citizens were barred from public office, property ownership, and military service, which were reserved for Macedonians. In Judea, the Ptolemies were largely indifferent to local culture and religion, allowing the High Priest to act as a civil governor.

Feature	Ptolemaic Policy in Judea
Governance	Indirect; high priest served as the local administrator.
Religion	Non-interference; freedom of Sabbath, dietary laws, and temple worship.
Taxation	Extremely high; utilized a multi-level "tax farming" system.
Cultural Stance	Disdainful of natives but made little effort to force assimilation.

The Seleucid Takeover (200 BC onwards)

Control shifted to the Seleucid Empire following the Syrian Wars (274–200 BC). Under Antiochus III, the Seleucids seized Palestine from the child-king Ptolemy V. The Seleucids viewed their rule as a partnership, seeking to "bless" the East with Greek culture. They restored the High Priest's authority over financial affairs (briefly held by the Tobiads) and introduced tax breaks for cities that converted into a Greek-style *polis*.

Administrative and Economic Structures

The Tax Farming System

The Ptolemies employed a lucrative but abusive taxation model. The central government set a quota for a region, and the right to collect it was "farmed" out to officials.

- **Systemic Abuse:** A magistrate might be required to raise 500 talents for the empire. He would demand 600 talents from his subordinates, pocketing the 100-talent difference. This extraction intensified at every level down to the local peasants.
- **The Tobiads:** This wealthy Ammonite family, mentioned as rivals to Nehemiah in biblical texts, emerged as powerful tax collectors. When the High Priest Onias II withheld tribute from the Ptolemies in a failed gamble on Seleucid strength, the Ptolemies stripped him of civil authority and transferred financial control to the Tobiads.

The Zenon Papyri

Discovered in 1914, this cache of approximately 1,800 documents provides a window into the financial administration of the 3rd century BC.

- **Content:** The papers belonged to Zenon, an officer of the chief treasury officer under Ptolemy II. They include business dealings, travelogues in Palestine, and records regarding the slave trade and sex trafficking.
- **Historical Value:** The papyri confirm the continued influence of the Tobias (Tobiad) dynasty and provide data on commodity prices (grain, slaves) and imperial revenue.

The Dynamics of Hellenization

Hellenization—the spread of Greek culture—was not a uniform process. Its impact depended on geography, social class, and the nature of the cultural adoption.

Judea vs. the Diaspora

- **Judean Jews:** Living in their native land surrounded by historical markers (e.g., sites associated with Joshua or ancestral holdings), they faced less pressure to acculturate.
- **Diaspora Jews:** In cities like Alexandria, Jews were surrounded by pagans and lacked physical ties to Judea. They were far more likely to assimilate, becoming fluent in Greek and engaging with Greek philosophy.

Cosmetic vs. Substantial Change

Most cultural adoption in Judea remained "window dressing" rather than a transformation of the Jewish soul.

Category	Hellenistic Influence/Change
Architecture	Replacement of the city gate with the city square (agora) for business; use of colonnades and Corinthian capitals.
Physical Culture	Installation of gymnasia (centers for Greek education/physical training) and theaters, though conservative Jews remained suspicious of the latter.
Dining	Transition from sitting cross-legged on the floor to reclining on benches or couches during meals.
Clothing	Adoption of shorter Greek-style robes and, for elites like Herod, the laurel wreath instead of traditional Near Eastern headdresses.
Language	Greek became the <i>lingua franca</i> for trade and government. However, Judean Jews like Josephus viewed the mastery of many languages as a "slave's skill," prioritizing the mastery of Law and tradition.

Social and Intellectual Evolution

Marriage and the Status of Women

Greek influence led to a measurable decline in the social status of Jewish women.

- **From Bride Price to Dowry:** In the Old Testament, the groom paid a "bride price" to the father, honoring the woman's value. Under Greek influence, the "dowry" system was adopted, where the father paid the husband to take the daughter, rendering her a financial liability.
- **Legal Standing:** In Hellenistic culture, women could not enter contracts without a husband's approval.
- **Divorce:** Divorce became more common and expected, with specific financial terms written into marriage contracts.
- **Monogamy:** While the Jewish ideal was often monogamous, Greek influence solidified this as the social norm, displacing remaining polygamous practices.

Philosophy and Religion

The Greek world's first impressions of the Jews were positive; Hecataeus of Abdera described them as a "race of philosophers" due to their lack of idols and their ethical laws.

- **Diaspora Synthesis:** Figures like Philo of Alexandria sought to reconcile the Bible with Platonic philosophy.
- **Judean Resistance:** In Jerusalem, there is little evidence that Jews read Greek literature like Homer. The "Hellenizing party" in Jerusalem was driven more by greed (seeking tax breaks for being a *polis*) than by a genuine ideological shift.

The Adoption of Astrology

Despite biblical prohibitions against Babylonian-style omen-reading, Jews eventually embraced Greek "scientific" astrology.

- **Greek Rationale:** The Greeks argued astrology was based on physics—the "music of the spheres"—where rotating celestial bodies influenced the earth through physical friction.
- **Evidence of Integration:** Horoscopes have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. By the 5th century AD, zodiac signs were even featured on the floors of Palestinian synagogues, reflecting a significant shift from earlier periods where animal and astral imagery was considered idolatrous.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: The Jews Under Greek Rule

This study guide examines the historical and cultural landscape of the Jewish people following the death of Alexander the Great, focusing on the era of the Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires. It explores the political shifts, economic pressures, and the complex process of Hellenization that influenced Jewish life in Judea and the Diaspora.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following ten questions in 2–3 sentences, based on the historical context provided.

1. What were the Wars of the Diadochi, and what was their primary outcome by 301 BC?
2. How did the early Ptolemaic rulers differ from the Seleucid rulers in their attitude toward native populations?
3. Explain the "tax farming" system utilized by the Ptolemies and its impact on the local population.
4. What are the Zenon Papyri, and why are they significant for understanding Jewish history?

5. Who was Onias II, and what were the consequences of his rebellion against the Ptolemies?
 6. What was the "polis" system, and how did the Seleucids use it to influence Judea?
 7. Contrast the adoption of Greek culture by upper-class Jews versus lower-class Jews.
 8. In what ways did the physical layout of Palestinian cities change under Greek influence?
 9. How did the Greek "dowry" system affect the status of Jewish women compared to the older "bride price" tradition?
 10. What evidence exists regarding the Jewish adoption of Greek astrology?
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Part II: Answer Key

1. The Wars of the Diadochi (321–301 BC) were a series of power struggles between Alexander the Great's generals following his death. By 301 BC, the empire was largely divided among three main powers: Lysimachus in Asia Minor, Seleucus in the former Persian Empire/Syria, and Ptolemy in Egypt and Palestine.
2. The Ptolemies were initially spiteful toward native Egyptians, barring them from public office and military service, whereas the Seleucids adopted a paternalistic approach. The Seleucids actively sought to "bless" their subjects with Greek culture through partnerships and the establishment of Greek-style cities.
3. Tax farming was a multi-level system where officials at each level were required to raise a specific quota but would "shake down" those below them for extra funds to pocket as profit. This system led to massive corruption and deep resentment among the common people at the bottom of the economic chain.
4. The Zenon Papyri are a collection of approximately 1,800 personal and business documents belonging to a 3rd-century BC official named Zenon.

They provide a rare window into the financial administration of Palestine and mention the Tobiad family, a wealthy Jewish dynasty.

5. Onias II was a high priest who withheld taxes from the Ptolemies because he anticipated a Seleucid takeover that did not immediately occur. As punishment, the Ptolemies allowed him to remain high priest for religious duties but stripped him of his civil and financial authority, transferring it to the Tobiad family.
6. A polis was a city organized according to Greek architectural and governmental principles. The Seleucids encouraged Jewish cities to become poleis by offering tax breaks and public funds for Greek-style projects like theaters and gymnasia.
7. Upper-class Jews, involved in trade and government, were more likely to assimilate by learning Greek and adopting Hellenistic customs to facilitate business. Lower-class Jews generally resisted these changes, often viewing the Greek-speaking Jewish elites as "wannabes" or buffoons.
8. Traditional city gates, once the centers of community life and judgment, were replaced by open city squares (agoras). Additionally, cities began featuring theaters, gymnasia, and Greek architectural elements such as colonnades and Corinthian capitals.
9. Under the traditional Jewish "bride price," a husband paid the father to honor and acquire a wife; under the Greek "dowry" system, a father paid the husband to take the daughter. This shift characterized daughters as financial liabilities and contributed to a decline in the social status of women.
10. Despite biblical prohibitions against Babylonian-style omen-reading, Jews eventually embraced the "scientific" Greek version of astrology based on the "music of the spheres." Evidence includes horoscopes found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and 5th-century synagogue floors featuring the zodiac.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the provided source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Geography of Identity:** Compare and contrast the pressure to acculturate among Jews living in the Judean homeland versus those living in the Diaspora (e.g., Alexandria). How did physical surroundings influence their ability to maintain Jewish traditions?
2. **Cosmetic vs. Substantial Hellenization:** Dr. Tomasino argues that much of the Greek influence on the Jews was "window dressing." Analyze the differences between changes in physical culture (clothing, architecture, dining) and the persistence of core Jewish identity (laws, stories, dietary restrictions).
3. **The Evolution of the High Priesthood:** Discuss the political and financial roles of the High Priest during the Ptolemaic and Seleucid eras. How did external imperial pressures and internal family rivalries (like the Tobiads) reshape the authority of this office?
4. **The Hellenizing Party of Jerusalem:** Explore the motivations of the "radicals" in Jerusalem who pushed for the city to become a Greek polis. To what extent was this movement driven by genuine cultural appreciation versus economic greed?
5. **Gender and Family Dynamics:** Evaluate the impact of Hellenistic culture on the Jewish family unit. Specifically, address the shift toward monogamy, the decline in women's legal status, and the Jewish resistance to Greek practices such as infanticide and small family sizes.

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Diadochi	The "successors" of Alexander the Great who fought for control of his empire from 321 to 301 BC.
Ptolemy I Soter	The general who established the Ptolemaic Kingdom in Egypt and initially controlled Palestine.
Seleucus	The general who established the Seleucid Empire, which eventually took control of Palestine from the Ptolemies.

Hellenization	The spread and adoption of Greek language, culture, and philosophy among non-Greek peoples.
Polis	A Greek-style city characterized by specific architectural features (like squares and theaters) and a government based on Greek principles.
Gymnasium	A center for Greek cultural training, focusing on the education of both the "excellent mind" and the "excellent body."
Tax Farming	An administrative system where the right to collect taxes is sold to individuals who then collect more than the required amount to keep as profit.
Zenon Papyri	A cache of 3rd-century BC documents discovered in 1914 that detail the business dealings of a Ptolemaic official in Palestine and Egypt.
Tobiads	A wealthy and influential Jewish dynasty (descended from Tobias the Ammonite) that competed with the High Priest for civil and financial power.
Diaspora	The dispersion of Jews outside of their ancestral homeland of Judea, particularly into cities like Alexandria and Antioch.
Lingua Franca	A common language used for trade and government among people of different native tongues; in this era, Greek served this role.
Philo of Alexandria	A prominent Diaspora Jewish philosopher who sought to reconcile biblical teachings with Greek Platonic philosophy.
Hecataeus of Abdera	An early Greek traveler whose writings described the Jews as a "race of philosophers."
Decapolis	A league of ten (or more) Greek-style cities established in the East as outposts of Hellenistic culture.

Music of the Spheres A Greek philosophical concept suggesting that the rotation of celestial spheres produced harmonic tones, forming the "scientific" basis for Greek astrology.
