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Chapter 10

ABRAHAM IN CONTEMPORARY GREEK AND LATIN AUTHORS

Margaret Williams

Survey of the Ancient Literature

Abraham does not receive so much as a mention in either of the surviving surveys in Greek of Jewish history and customs: those written by, respectively, the historian, Diodorus Siculus (second half of the first century BCE) and the geographer, Strabo of Amaseia (active around the beginning of the Common Era).¹ The reason for this omission is that both these scholars believed that the key foundational figure of Judaism was Moses. This conception of Jewish history—though surfacing for the first time in surviving Graeco-Roman literature only in their respective works²—was considerably older. Its first appearance in a classical text had been c. 300 BCE, the approximate date of Hecataeus of Abdera's pioneering study of the Jews, the first to be written by a Greek in Greek.³ That Hecataeus should have found no room for Abraham in his account of the origins, institutions, and practices of the Jews is not surprising. Viewing Jewish history from a wholly Hellenic perspective, he saw in Moses a typical founder/lawgiver figure: i.e., an *oikistes/nomothetes*.⁴

1. For these two scholars, see *OCD*³, s.v.v. Diodorus (3) and Strabo. For their ethnographic surveys of the Jews, see M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 3 vols., (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974–84) [hereafter, *GLAJ*], Vol. 1, 11 and 115.

2. Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl.* 40.3.3–8; Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.2.35–6.

3. For a full discussion of Hecataeus' work, see B. Bar-Kochva, *The Image of the Jews in Greek Literature: The Hellenistic Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 90–135.

4. The work by Hecataeus on Abraham, mentioned by Josephus, *Ant.* 1.159 is unanimously agreed to be a late Hellenistic Jewish forgery. See Bar-Kochva, *Image of the Jews*, 93–4 and 135.

In the principal surviving account in Latin of Jewish origins, customs, and history, that of Tacitus (early second century CE), the same view of Jewish history is also to be found. Sharing the general Roman lack of interest in ethnographic matters,⁵ Tacitus was happy simply to accept what he had found in his Greek sources, hence his attribution also of the Jews' distinctive social and religious practices to Moses.⁶ At no point does he mention Abraham.

This absence of Abraham from Hecataeus' ethnography and the principal surviving surveys of Jewish origins and customs by Greek and Latin authors, does not mean, however, that Abraham does not figure at all in Greek and Latin literature. Although Hecataeus' ground-breaking study of the Jews initially had the field to itself, and remained hugely influential for a long time,⁷ in due course it was joined by other works in Greek that dealt in varying degrees with Jewish customs, personalities, and history. Bar-Kochva lists around a dozen such writings, several of them authored by individuals of enormous intellectual stature within Hellenic society.⁸ It is in the fragments of some of these works, preserved as citations in the works of later authors, that the hitherto neglected figure of Abraham makes a brief appearance.⁹

But it is not just writers of Hellenic ethnicity who wrote works in Greek in the period after Hecataeus. With the diffusion of Jews from the late fourth century BCE onwards throughout the territories that had, prior to Alexander the Great, formed part of the Persian empire, other ethnic groups, such as Babylonians and Egyptians, became increasingly aware of the Jews in their midst. With awareness came curiosity, and with curiosity, first, a gathering of knowledge and then a desire to put that knowledge into the public domain. Since Greek had now replaced Aramaic as the lingua franca of empire, it was through the medium of Greek that they operated.

Not all of this work was friendly; for many non-Jews, the Jews themselves came over as an uncongenial people whose socio-religious practices seemed distinctly peculiar, even offensive. Consequently, when it was discovered that the author of those practices had been a certain Moses, then he became the subject of particular

5. R.S. Bloch, *Antike Vorstellungen vom Judentum: Der Judenexkurs des Tacitus im Rahmen der griechisch-römischen Ethnographie* (Historia-Einzelschriften 160; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2002), 176–85.

6. Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.4.

7. According to Bar-Kochva, *Image of the Jews*, 90, it became “a sort of vulgate on which later authors drew for information on the Jews.”

8. Bar-Kochva, *Image of the Jews*, 3–4. Of these now largely lost works, the one most to be regretted is that of Posidonius, the author in the late first/early second century BCE of an idealizing study of the Jews, thought to be Strabo's main source at *GLAJJ*, Vol. 1, 115. For an in-depth study of Posidonius and his works, see Bar-Kochva, *Image of the Jews*, chapters 10–13.

9. For a comprehensive list of the Graeco-Roman authors mentioning Abraham, see J.S. Siker, “Abraham in Graeco-Roman Paganism”, *JSJ* 18 (1997): 188–208.

vilification.¹⁰ In turn, such vilification provoked a spirited Jewish backlash, the consequences of which were not only a vigorous defense of Moses by Hellenized Diaspora Jews, but their energetic championing of other, no less distinguished, figures from the Jewish past. Notable among these cultural heroes was Abraham, an individual whose origins (Chaldaean), and therefore implied skills (astrological know-how), made him a far more sympathetic and “marketable” figure than Moses.

Most of these writers in Greek, no matter what their ethnic origin, can hardly be classed as household names, as will become apparent below.¹¹ Indeed, so little interest did some of these writers evoke, even in antiquity, that their works almost certainly would have vanished without a trace had it not been for the efforts largely of one man: a Milesian freedman active in Rome in the first half of the first century BCE, Cornelius Alexander, more commonly known as Alexander Polyhistor. An indefatigable researcher and harvester of quotations and historical facts (whence his nickname¹²), he produced a vast number of compilations (now largely lost) on a wide range of subjects, one of which concerned itself solely with the Jews: the *Περὶ Ἰουδαίων* (*On the Jews*).¹³ Rescued from total oblivion, mostly because the early Christian historian Eusebius of Caesarea found portions of this wide-ranging collection of Jewish material particularly useful for his propagandist tract, the *Praeparatio Evangelica* (*Preparation for the Gospel*), Polyhistor’s *Περὶ Ἰουδαίων* furnishes us with some of the most colorful material about Abraham to survive from the whole of Graeco-Roman antiquity.

In comparison with the some of the Hellenistic writing about Abraham, the material on him by authors of the Roman imperial period seems rather tame. Tameness aside, it is not without its merits. The sources, being more substantial¹⁴ and more precisely datable,¹⁵ enable us to perceive with unprecedented clarity the close relationship that existed between the presentation of Abraham, on the one hand, and societal needs and values, on the other. Since none of these things

10. A pioneer of this form of abuse was the third-century Egyptian priest, Manetho, for whom see *GLAJJ*, Vol. 1, 62–5.

11. So obscure are some of them (e.g., Cleodemus Malchus) that even the most basic things about them (e.g., their date and ethnicity) cannot be precisely determined.

12. See, for instance, Suetonius, *Gram. et Rhet.* 20.1 (Cornelium Alexandrum, grammaticum Graecum, quem propter antiquitatis notitiam Polyhistorem multi, quidam Historiam vocabant). While “Polyhistor” (“much-inquiring”/“very learned”) occurs commonly in references to Alexander, “Historia” (“Mr History”) is found only in this passage. For full discussion, see R.A. Kaster, ed., *C. Suetonius Tranquillus—De Grammaticis et Rhetoribus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 210.

13. On Polyhistor generally, see E. Rawson, *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 8, 44, 55, 61–2, 69–70, 249, 256, 267, 293–4, 299 and 309.

14. The only complete texts with which we shall be dealing here, the astrological treatises of Vettius Valens and Firmicus Maternus, both come from this period.

15. The emperor Julian’s anti-Christian polemic, *Contra Galilaeos*, for instance, can be dated precisely to the winter of 362/3 CE.

remained static, it is not surprising that the depiction of Abraham changed in response to changes within Graeco-Roman society, the most momentous of which was the increasingly Christian nature of the Roman Empire from the time of Constantine onwards.

In order to appreciate the changing ways in which Abraham was portrayed by Greek and Latin writers over the long period under consideration here, it will be best to deal with the evidence in a linear fashion, starting with the Greek writers of the middle and late Hellenistic periods and ending with the Roman writers of the fourth century CE. To proceed in a strict chronological order is not possible, given the uncertain dating of many of the authors, especially those active in the period before Alexander Polyhistor.

Hellenistic Writers on Abraham

Hellenic Authors

Out of the many Hellenic authors of the middle and late Hellenistic periods whose work contained a Jewish element, only three actually mentioned Abraham and so are of relevance here. The earliest of these is Hermippus of Smyrna, a scholar with primarily philosophical interests, whose professional life was spent at Alexandria's world-renowned research institute, the Museum, during the latter half of the third century BCE.¹⁶ Second in chronological order comes the internationally famous rhetorician and teacher of rhetoric, Apollonius Molon. Originally from Alabanda in Caria, he plied his craft in the first half of the first century BCE mostly in the republic of Rhodes, where he was visited by, among other elite young Romans, the budding orator and politician Marcus Tullius Cicero.¹⁷ Slightly later in the same century comes Nicolaus of Damascus. A one-time tutor of the children of Cleopatra VII by Marcus Antonius, he subsequently became a key figure at the court of Herod the Great and the highly regarded author of numerous works of literature. Among these was a 144-book universal history, a substantial part of which, perhaps thirty books or more, was devoted to the rise to power and reign of his patron, Herod.¹⁸

Originating from areas with established Jewish communities, and conducting their professional lives in cities which not only contained substantial Jewish populations but also provided plentiful opportunities for research,¹⁹ each of these

16. For Hermippus' dates, see J. Bollansée, *Hermippus of Smyrna and His Biographical Writings: A Reappraisal* (Leuven: Peters, 1999), 14–15.

17. Bar-Kochva, *Image of the Jews*, 469–516.

18. B. Wacholder, *Nicolaus of Damascus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 62.

19. For the core evidence relating to Jewish settlement in each of these places, see F. Millar's "geographical survey", in E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3 vols. (revised by G. Vermes et al., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973–87), Vol. 3.1, 3–86.

distinguished scholars came, over time, to view the course of Jewish history rather differently from Hecataeus. From the various sources to which they had access, many of them not available to Hecataeus himself, they came to realize that Moses, though clearly a figure of importance, was not the fount of all things Jewish. Their researches showed them that before Moses a whole line of characterful and influential leaders had existed, prominent among whom had been the patriarch Abraham.

Since these scholars were operating in different parts of the Graeco-Roman world, were utilizing different sources, were motivated by different agendas, and had different attitudes towards the Jews, unsurprisingly the portraits that they present of Abraham vary considerably.

For Hermippus, almost certainly drawing upon materials generated in Egyptian Jewish circles (on which, more below), “the most wonderful Abraham” (ὁ θαυμασιώτατος Ἀβραμὸς) was an astrological authority to be revered and cited.²⁰ That Hermippus should have viewed Abraham so positively is not a surprise. Citations from his works by Josephus and Origen show that he held Judaism, in his eyes a philosophical system, in high regard.²¹

Nicolaus of Damascus was no less positive about Abraham, something only to be expected given that his patron and employer at the time of the composition of the universal history was the Jewish king, Herod the Great. Depicting Abraham in the fourth book of that work as a kind of proto-Hellenistic monarch, Nicolaus has him invading Syria from the Land of the Chaldees (i.e., Babylonia), capturing its main city with the backing of an army (σὺν στρατῷ) and then ruling over it as its king.²² Since Herod had within living memory established his rule over Judaea in an almost identical manner (37 BCE),²³ it is not difficult to see what is driving the presentation of Abraham here. Clearly the latter is intended to be seen as a prototype for Herod: the successful ruler in the manner of Alexander the Great of “spear-won territory” (γῆ δορίκτητος).²⁴

So much for Nicolaus’ motivation. What about his sources? That he was at least acquainted with the biblical version of Abraham’s life is shown by the reference to the latter’s Chaldaic origin.²⁵ For the Damascene part of his tale, however, his source almost certainly will have been more immediate. Among his erstwhile fellow citizens the Damascenes, there was a lively oral tradition, probably of local

20. *GLAJJ*, Vol. 2, 339. This reference, known only from its citation by the second-century CE astrological writer Vettius Valens, will be discussed below in the section on that writer.

21. *GLAJJ*, Vol. 1, 25 and 26.

22. Josephus, *Ant.* 1.159.

23. Josephus, *Ant.* 14.394–486. On Nicolaus as the most likely source for the narrative here, see Wacholder, *Nicolaus of Damascus*, 60–2.

24. For the Hellenistic concept of spear-won territory, see P. Green, *From Alexander to Actium: The Hellenistic Age* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 187 and 194.

25. Gen. 11:28 and 31; 15:7.

Jewish origin,²⁶ that Abraham had once dwelt in their city. Nicolaus almost certainly will have known of this tradition, as there still existed in his day, in the vicinity of Damascus, a village which was called Abraham's Abode after that patriarch.²⁷

In contrast to the wholly favorable depictions of Abraham by Hermippus and Nicolaus, Apollonius Molon's portrayal of the patriarch in his monograph on the Jews appears to be rather negative, notwithstanding the view expressed recently by Bar-Kochva that Molon's treatment of Abraham and the early patriarchal period is "unbiased."²⁸ Since I need to defend, not merely assert, my divergent view here, I now supply as an aid to the discussion a translation of my own of the evidence at issue: a citation by Eusebius at *Praep. Ev.* 9.19 of an earlier citation by Polyhistor from a work by Molon:

But Molon, the one who wrote the abusive work against the Jews, says that after the Flood the man who had survived (i.e., Noah) departed from Armenia with his sons, having been driven from his home by the people of the country. Having crossed the intervening territory, he came to the mountainous part of Syria which was uninhabited. After three generations Abraham was born, whose name by interpretation means "father-loving". Becoming/being wise, he sought the desert. After taking two wives, one, a local (and) a relative, the other, an Egyptian (and) a slave, he had twelve sons by the Egyptian, who, departing for Arabia, divided up the land among themselves and were the first to rule as kings over the people of that country. As a result of this, (even) in our day there are twelve kings of the Arabians, having the same names as them (i.e., Abraham's sons). From his wife, he had one son whose name in Greek was Gelos (Laughter). Abraham died of old age. From Gelos (= Isaac) and his native wife there were born eleven sons and a twelfth, Joseph, and from him, in the third generation, Moses. So writes Polyhistor.

On the face of it, this passage is not noticeably anti-Semitic: the genealogy of the Jews from the Flood until Moses, although full of errors, some of them egregious (e.g., making the twelve tribal leaders of the Jews the sons of Isaac rather than Jacob), is rendered in a very matter-of-fact way. Further, the portrait of Abraham, the central character in Molon's narrative, is not overtly negative. Indeed, in a clear echo of Hecataeus' portrait of Moses,²⁹ Abraham is described as wise. If we probe beneath the surface, however, a rather different picture can be discerned.

26. Bar-Kochva, *Image of the Jews*, 488 n.57.

27. That was still the case almost a century later. See Josephus, *Ant.* 1.160: "The name of Abraham is still celebrated in the region of Damascus, and a village is pointed out that is called after him Abraham's Abode."

28. Bar-Kochva, *Image of the Jews*, 470–1.

29. See Diodorus, *Bibl.* 40.3.3 = *GLAJJ*, Vol. 1, 11.

Although there can be no doubt that Molon's main source was, albeit somewhat distantly, the narrative found in Genesis of the early patriarchal period, it clearly has become distorted through being blended with material of less benign origin. For at several points in this passage unmistakable traces of themes common in the anti-Semitic literature of the period—most of them emanating from Graeco-Egyptian circles—can be detected.

Ignoring the favorable account of Abraham's origins—that he had come from the Land of the Chaldees (i.e., Babylonia), a country whose inhabitants were renowned for their astronomical and astrological skills³⁰—Molon invents an altogether less prestigious background for him. By transferring to the early patriarchal period elements of the hostile Graeco-Egyptian portrayal of the Exodus, according to which that seminal event had been the result of a *xenelasia*, a driving out of undesirable foreigners,³¹ he subtly but deliberately denigrates the early patriarchs, the most prominent of whom, at least in this passage, was Abraham. Further, in order to strengthen the association between Abraham and that first "national" humiliation, he shortens the interval between Noah and Abraham, making it a mere three generations, instead of the biblical ten.³²

This is not the only instance, however, of Molon transferring to Abraham elements from the Graeco-Roman version of the Moses story. From Hecataeus onwards, it was a feature of Graeco-Roman writing on the Jews to comment upon their excessive numbers, their *polyandria*, and to blame Moses for this situation, the latter having criminalized infanticide.³³ A striking feature of this passage is the focus on the philoprogenitiveness of Abraham and his offspring. Not only is Abraham (incorrectly) said to have fathered no fewer than twelve sons by his Egyptian slave, but Gelos/Isaac, equally incorrectly, is claimed to have produced another dozen.

The negativity of this passage does not come about, however, solely from the transference to Abraham of elements from the hostile Graeco-Roman tradition relating to Moses. Some of it almost certainly arises from Molon's own well documented antipathy to Jews. According to Josephus, the main transmitter of citations from Molon's writings, the latter had not only accused Moses of being a charlatan and an impostor (*Apion* 2.145) but he had also described the Jews as "the

30. In antiquity, the two disciplines enjoyed a parity of status, astrology being seen as "the application of astronomy . . . to the sublunary environment." See *OCD*³, s.v. astrology.

31. For a survey of the Greek and Latin texts in which this view is expressed, see P. Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes towards the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 15–33. On Molon's allusion to this tradition, see Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 21.

32. Gen. 11:10–26 for the ancestry of Abraham.

33. See, for instance, Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.3: "augendae tamen multitudini consulitur . . . hinc generandi amor" = however, they take thought to increase their numbers. Hence their passion for begetting children. On the negative connotations here of *multitudo*, see Bloch, *Antike Vorstellungen*, 87 n.54.

most inferior of the barbarians,”³⁴ a sentiment later echoed by the most distinguished of his elite pupils, Cicero, who at one point described the Jews as a nation born to be slaves.³⁵

Given such contempt for the Jews, it is not surprising that in this extract the semi-servile status of the majority of Abraham’s offspring, the twelve sons by the anonymous Egyptian slave-girl, is greatly emphasized, and most of his close family members are not even dignified with a personal name. That the responsibility for this omission of names lies with Molon rather than his excerptor can safely be deduced from other citations made by that scholar;³⁶ omitting personal names in the interests of succinctness clearly was not Polyhistor’s regular practice.

From the foregoing, the conclusion seems inescapable that Molon’s depiction of Abraham, far from being unbiased, is on the whole quite negative. Indeed, it would be amazing if it were to be anything else, given Eusebius’s description of Molon’s monograph as “an abusive work against the Jews”³⁷ and Molon’s own reputation in antiquity as a dyed-in-the-wool anti-Semite.³⁸

Works in Greek by Non-Hellenic Scholars

It was not solely in works by scholars of Hellenic origin, however, that Jews made an appearance in the Greek literature of the later Hellenistic period. Hellenized intellectuals from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, Babylonian, Egyptian, Jewish, also produced works in that language that dealt wholly or in part with Jewish matters. In several of these works Abraham appears.

Whether the reference by the nationalistic Babylonian historian, the priest Berossus, to “the just and great man versed in celestial lore who lived among the Chaldaeans in the tenth generation after the flood” is actually an allusion to Abraham is disputed. Although Josephus (*Ant.* 1.158) was of the opinion that “our father Abraham” (ὁ πατήρ ἡμῶν Ἀβραάμ) was meant by these words, Stern was not convinced by this interpretation, and so excluded this reference from his collection.³⁹ Siker, by contrast, believes that “the convergence of three elements in this passage traditionally associated with Abraham as one who was *dikaïos*, *para Chaldaïos*, and *ta ourania empeiros* seems to point quite naturally to Abraham,”⁴⁰ a conclusion with which I find it hard to disagree. For even if Josephus had drawn

34. *Apion* 2.148, adding that “they were the only people who had made no useful contribution to civilisation.”

35. *De prov. cos.* 5.10 = *GLAJJ*, Vol. 1, 70.

36. See, for instance, Polyhistor’s citation from the works of Demetrius the Chronographer, quoted by Eusebius (*Praep. Ev.* 9.21). On the general accuracy of Polyhistor’s citations, see Bar-Kochva, *Image of the Jews*, 480.

37. *Praep. Ev.* 9.19.

38. Josephus, *Apion* 2.145 and 236.

39. Stern, *GLAJJ*, Vol. 1, 55.

40. Siker, “Abraham in Graeco-Roman Paganism”, 189 n.3.

this equation from Jewish-Hellenistic circles (Stern's sole grounds for rejecting this passage), that does not necessarily invalidate the equation itself.

No such doubt, however, attaches to the testimonies of Eupolemus, Artapanus and Cleodemus Malchus, for all three writers are cited by Eusebius precisely because they specifically mention Abraham, and so provide proof that he was not simply a Christian invention.⁴¹ Although there has been much debate in the past as to who precisely these writers were,⁴² Gruen is surely right in arguing that all three could have been Jewish.⁴³ The most striking feature of the citations from their respective works is the clear determination shown to utilize and to embellish the biblical traditions relating to the more charismatic of the ancient ancestors of the Jews. And who but Jews would have had any interest in doing that or the knowledge and expertise to carry that out? But we can go further than this. Since the ancestral episodes that are written up never relate to the Land of Canaan (i.e., Judaea) but in every case are concerned with an area densely inhabited by Jews by the middle of the Hellenistic period (i.e., Egypt, or Phoenicia, or Libya), it surely is safe to infer that both the creators of this material and the people at whom it was aimed (mainly Diaspora Jews?) are likely to have had some association with those areas too.

Thus we find Artapanus,⁴⁴ exploiting the tradition that Abraham had actually met and been honored by the Pharaoh during his sojourn in Egypt,⁴⁵ to make the case for the cultural superiority of the Jews of his native Egypt⁴⁶ over both the indigenous inhabitants of that country and its ruling Graeco-Macedonian elite. Not only does he claim that this famous ancestor of the Jews, the man after whom they were named,⁴⁷ introduced the Egyptians in general to the esteemed "science"

41. See Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 9.17–18 and 20.

42. With regard to Eupolemus, I here follow those who believe that the material ascribed to him by Polyhistor/Eusebius was actually written by a totally different, anonymous author. For a succinct discussion of this complicated issue, see M. Goodman, "Prose Literature about the Past", in Schürer, *History* (revised), Vol. 3.1, 517–20 and 528–30.

43. E.S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 146–53. The least certain of the three is Cleodemus Malchus. However, even if he himself was not Jewish, his material with its strong *interpretatio Judaica* clearly was. So Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism*, 152.

44. As cited by Eusebius at *Praep. Ev.* 9.18.1

45. Gen. 12:10–20.

46. From the strongly Egyptian focus of all the surviving fragments of Artapanus, as well as the knowledge shown of the Septuagint, scholars unanimously conclude that he must have been an Egyptian Jew. For full discussion, see for instance, Goodman "Prose Literature", in Schürer, *History* (revised), Vol. 3.1, 521–4; J.J. Collins, "Artapanus", in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth, Vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985 and 1985), 889–95.

47. "Καλεῖσθαι δὲ αὐτοὺς ἀπὸ Ἀβραάμου": Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 9.18.1. The basis for this is probably Gen. 14:13, according to Goodman "Prose Literature", in Schürer, *History* (revised), Vol. 3.1, 523.

of astrology, but he even has Abraham giving instruction in that subject to the Pharaoh himself!

Bold as the claims of Artapanus are, they are as nothing compared with those of Eupolemus. Elaborating upon the stories in Genesis of Abraham's experiences in the Land of the Philistines,⁴⁸ Eupolemus portrays him not only as an instructor of the Phoenicians in heavenly matters, teaching them "the changes of the sun and moon, and all things of that kind," but also as a successful military commander, a man skilled in conflict-resolution, and a firm favorite with the local ruler.⁴⁹ Nor did he allow Abraham's achievements to rest there. Following a famine-induced migration to Egypt, Abraham is claimed to have made a considerable mark upon the culture of that country too. During a period of cohabitation with Egyptian priests at Heliopolis, a major cult center and a renowned seat of learning,⁵⁰ he is said to have introduced that elite group "*both* to astronomy *and* to the other sciences."⁵¹

With Cleodemus Malchus, we move into another part of the Jewish world, North Africa (Libya), an area where Jewish military settlement started in the early Ptolemaic period,⁵² and from where Cleodemus Malchus himself may have come.⁵³ In the solitary passage from his work that has come down to us, a citation made by Polyhistor and preserved, with slight variations, in both Josephus and Eusebius,⁵⁴ Abraham himself does not play an active role, the main *dramatis personae* being three of his sons by his second wife/concubine Ketturah, the suggestively named Assur, Afra, and Afer.⁵⁵ Notwithstanding Abraham's absence from the action, Heracles's legendary expedition against the North African giant, Antaeus, the reader is able to infer from the successful part played by his sons in that enterprise, a great deal about Abraham himself. Not only had these sons helped Heracles to defeat the giant, but their contribution to the whole enterprise had been considered so significant that one of them, Afra, had been rewarded with a marriage-connection with the great man himself!

48. Genesis 20 and 21.

49. Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 9.17.4–5. Goodman "Prose Literature", in Schürer, *History* (revised), Vol. 3.1, 529 sees here a midrash on Genesis 14.

50. It is worth noting here that it was at Heliopolis that Manetho, the Jews' arch-critic, was a priest.

51. Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 9.17.8.

52. See Millar "geographical survey", in Schürer, *History* (revised), Vol. 3.1, 60.

53. For speculation about this writer's place of origin, see R. Doran, "Cleodemus Malchus", in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983 and 1985), Vol. 2, 882–6, here 885.

54. Josephus, *Ant.* 1.239–41; Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 9.20.2–4.

55. Assur, recalling Assyria, and the other two, Afra and Afer, a city Afra and the country Africa. So Eusebius at *Praep. Ev.* 9.20. In Genesis (25:1–4), the names of the sons of Abraham and Ketturah are entirely different.

Given the widespread belief at that time that the qualities exhibited by a man's sons must have been inherited from their father,⁵⁶ much is implied about Abraham here. The military feats of the sons allow, indeed positively encourage, the reader to infer that their father too must have been a warrior of the highest caliber. Like them, he is also to be seen as a champion of civilization against barbarism, and so a justification for the powerful presence, from the third century BCE onwards, of the Jews in North Africa.⁵⁷ Through the link that is forged through the marriage of Afra's daughter to Heracles, Abraham himself can be depicted as the social equal of the very best in the non-Jewish world. Finally, through the aetiological names he had given to his sons, it is to be inferred that the Jews' great ancestor had entertained suitably grand ambitions for his people!

Writers of the Roman Imperial Period on Abraham

Compared with these extravagances, the material supplied about Abraham by writers of the Roman imperial period is distinctly unexciting. Further, it cannot be denied that some of their references to Abraham contribute virtually nothing to the discussion here. Counterbalancing these negatives, however, are some important positives. Firstly, the identity of the authors for the most part is far more certain than was the case in the Hellenistic period and the evidence, in consequence, more precisely datable. Secondly, the material about Abraham is more directly accessible, as on the whole we are dealing with works that are either fully extant or surviving in substantial quantities rather than, as earlier, with short citations whose original context is lost. Together these factors make it far easier than heretofore to appreciate how the portraiture of Abraham was influenced by the social situation in which it was created.

For the most striking aspect of the evidence to be presented in this section, is the way in which the depiction of Abraham changes over time. While the focus at the start of the Roman imperial period is very much on Abraham as a secular figure, the later writers, i.e., those active in the third and the fourth centuries CE, tend to dwell more on his religiosity, depicting him in one case, as a scrupulous performer of ritual practices⁵⁸ and in another as a man so holy that he merited personal worship.⁵⁹ This shift in emphasis from the secular to the religious is

56. L.H. Feldman, "Hellenizations in Josephus' Jewish Antiquities: The Portrait of Abraham", in *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*, eds. L. H. Feldman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 133–53, here 147–8.

57. On the military origins of Jewish settlement in North Africa (Libya), see Josephus, *Apion* 2.44.

58. Of particular note is the emperor Julian's comment at *Contra Galilaeos* 356C (= *GLAJJ*, Vol. 2, 481a): "For Abraham used to sacrifice even as we (*sc.* Greeks and Romans) do, always and continually."

59. *SHA*, Alexander Severus 29.2 (= *GLAJJ*, Vol. 2, 522).

largely a reflection of the changing character of Graeco-Roman society at that time, a period which saw not only the emergence of a variety of entirely new cults in various parts of the empire, but the triumph of Christianity over the whole of it. In this new, increasingly Christianized environment, religious identity and behavior, hitherto largely taken for granted, at least by elite Graeco-Roman writers, became a matter of paramount interest. Hence the entirely new focus upon the religious side of Abraham and the complete disappearance from the record (at least as we have it) of Abraham as a military and regal figure.

What does not change, however, is the respect accorded Abraham as an astrological authority. This neatly reflects the continuing regard in which Chaldaean lore—i.e., the art of astrology first developed by the Babylonians—was held. Notwithstanding the occasional show of hostility by the Roman authorities against its practitioners,⁶⁰ in general astrology was taken very seriously in Graeco-Roman society, at all levels and at all periods.⁶¹

Early Imperial Writers In the earliest text to be considered here, an extract from the *Historiae Philippicae* (*Philippic History*)—a history of the post-Alexander Hellenistic world written in Latin in Rome during the reign of Augustus by the Romanized Gallic scholar, Pompeius Trogus⁶²—the secular Abraham is still very much in evidence in the form of a kingly ruler of Damascus. However, the presentation of Abraham in that role by Trogus is rather different from that found in Nicolaus' universal history. Whereas the latter had depicted Abraham as an invader from Babylonia who had gained control of that city by force of arms, Trogus, using a source that claimed a Damascene origin for the Jews,⁶³ sees him as an indigenous ruler. And whereas there is no hint in Nicolaus' text of Abraham being part of any Damascene dynasty—indeed it is claimed there that “not long after” his capture of Damascus, Abraham left with his followers for the Land of Canaan⁶⁴—that is not the case with Trogus. He states explicitly that after Abraham's death, his son (sic) Israhel (i.e., Jacob) ruled over the city in his place.⁶⁵

60. On the intermittent expulsions of astrologers from Rome and Italy, see F.H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1954), 233–48.

61. T. Barton, *Ancient Astrology* (London: Routledge, 1994).

62. Probably between the years 2 BCE and 2 CE. See J. M. Alonso-Núñez, “An Augustan World History: The ‘*Historiae Philippicae*’ of Pompeius Trogus”, *Greece and Rome* 34, no.1 (1987): 56–72, here 60–1. The text that we have, however, is not the original but an abridged version, produced probably in the third/fourth century CE, by a certain Justin. See Stern at *GLAJJ*, Vol.1, 332–3 and no. 127.

63. *Hist. Phil.* 36.2.1, *Iudaeis origo Damascena*.

64. As cited at Josephus, *Ant.* 1.159.

65. *Hist. Phil.* 36.2.3. For an illuminating discussion of Trogus' Jewish excursus, see Bloch, *Antike Vorstellungen*, 59–61.

That Trogus should present a version of Abraham's relations with Damascus so different from that of Nicolaus is not at all surprising. As a desk-bound researcher in Rome, he will have had no access to the oral Damascene traditions with which Nicolaus, a native of that city, can be assumed to have had an easy familiarity. Instead, Trogus will have had to rely upon Greek written sources, of which at least three are discernible in his brief excursus on the Jews. Stern has characterized these as "a biblical version, a Damascene version and a hostile Graeco-Egyptian version."⁶⁶ That it has not proved possible to precisely identify the authors of these versions, despite vigorous scholarly attempts to do so, matters not a jot here.⁶⁷ Far more significant is the fact that the version that had started as a local, probably Jewish, tradition in Damascus,⁶⁸ had become an established part of Graeco-Roman literature on the Jews.

With Vettius Valens, writing a century and a half after Trogus during the reign of Antoninus Pius (138–161 CE), the secular Abraham still remains very much to the fore. Here, however, it is Abraham the astrologer who is the subject of interest in his nine-book treatise *Anthologia*, not Abraham the king. That we should find this to be the case here is not surprising. As well as being a specialist writer on the subject of astrology, Valens was also a life-long practitioner of that art.⁶⁹

While Valens' focus on Abraham as an astrologer in an astrological treatise is not surprising, his presentation of him in that role is. Whereas for Artapanus and Eupolemus, Abraham was simply a *teacher* of astrology—admittedly to the elite and the very great—in Valens we meet him for the first time as a *writer* on the subject. Not only does Valens refer to Abraham's written works but he even quotes from them. Thus at *Anthologia* 2.28 we find the following "The most wonderful Abramós has shown us about this position (on travelling) in his books (ἐν τοῖς βιβλίοις αὐτοῦ)."

Although it is only with this citation that we first hear of Abraham as a writer on astrology, clearly the belief that Abraham was an author of books on the subject is much older, for Valens' citation comes at second-hand from a much earlier writer, none other than Hermippus of Smyrna/Alexandria.⁷⁰ Since Hermippus was writing in the second half of the third century BCE, it shows that the tradition must have become well established in academic circles in Alexandria by that time: testimony surely to the success of Egyptian Jews in promoting their ancestor as a cultural hero.

Astonishing as this information is about the existence of these presumably pseudonymous texts and at such an early date, it needs to be taken seriously. For

66. *GLAJJ*, Vol. 1, 332.

67. Useful discussion at Bar-Kochva, *Image of the Jews*, 489 n.58, and Bloch, *Antike Vorstellungen*, 58–9.

68. Bar-Kochva, *Image of the Jews*, 488 n.57.

69. See M. Riley, *A Survey of Vettius Valens*: http://www.csus.edu/indiv/r/rileymt/PDF_folder/VettiusValens.PDF, accessed July 9, 2018.

70. *GLAJJ*, Vol. 1, 339: "On travelling, from the works of Hermippus ..."

both Hermippus and Valens were very serious scholars, the former a much-admired philosopher, and the latter an astrological authority of paramount importance not only during his lifetime but long after his death. Until well into the Middle Ages, Valens' astrological treatise was treated as a veritable *vade mecum* by astrologers and even today his work is taken very seriously, the *Anthologia* being regarded by scholars researching ancient astrology as the most important work on that subject to survive from antiquity.⁷¹

With the third and final author in this section, the distinguished Antonine politician and writer of a 44-book universal history, Aulus Claudius Charax of Pergamum,⁷² the focus is still on the secular Abraham. Here, however, he appears neither as an astrologer nor as a king but the man who gave the distinctive name, Hebrews, to the Jewish people. The evidence, preserved as an entry in Stephanus of Byzantium's (sixth century CE) ethnographic/geographic dictionary, could not be more succinct. Under the heading *Hebraioi* (Hebrews), the following definition is to be found: "This is the name Jews get from Abraham, as Charax says."⁷³ Since, as we saw above, Polyhistor cites Artapanus to precisely the same effect,⁷⁴ it would be easy simply to dismiss out of hand Charax's evidence here. However, it may have had a greater value for his readers than for us. While Polyhistor's work appears to have made very little impact on the reading public of the (pagan) Roman world,⁷⁵ Charax's now lost universal history is known to have been widely read in antiquity.⁷⁶ Consequently, his notice about the Abrahamic origins of the term *Hebraioi*, even if it is not news to us, may have been the first information that some Roman readers attained on this point.

Later Imperial Writers The first of the three writers to be considered in this section is Firmicus Maternus, a retired Roman lawyer from the age of Constantine, and the author of the last substantial treatise on astrology to be written in classical times: the eight-book *Mathesis* (*Learning*).⁷⁷ Given the subject matter of this work, it is not surprising that it is as an astrological authority that Abraham features in it: his last

71. *OCD*³, s.v. Vettius Valens.

72. For this distinguished member of the Roman governing class—who early in his career helped Q. Lollius Urbicus to conquer Scotland for the emperor, Antoninus Pius—see A.R. Birley, *The Roman Government of Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 253–4.

73. Stephanus Byzantius, *Lex. s.v. Εβραῖοι* = *GLAJJ*, Vol. 2, 335 (Εβραῖοι. οὕτως Ἰουδαῖοι ἀπὸ Ἀβραάμωνος ὡς φησι Χάραξ.)

74. See n.47 above.

75. Rawson, *Intellectual Life*, 62.

76. *OCD*³, s.v. Claudius Charax, Aulus.

77. For a full translation of this work, see J.R. Bram, *Ancient Astrology Theory and Practice: Matheseos Libri VIII by Firmicus Maternus* (Park Ridge, NJ: Noyes Press, 1975). For Firmicus Maternus himself, see D. McCann, "Julius Firmicus Maternus: Profile of a Roman Astrologer": <http://www.skyscript.co.uk/firmicus.html>, accessed July 9, 2018.

appearance in that role in classical antiquity. Clearly Maternus has considerable regard for this figure from the remote past. Well acquainted with Abraham's writings, he not only refers to them at several points in his own work,⁷⁸ but he even claims to have included an appendix containing an extract from Abraham's very own books (*ex Abrahæ libris*) to prove the veracity of what he has been saying.⁷⁹

Maternus' admiration for Abraham, however, goes beyond merely quoting from his work. He puts it firmly on record that he counts him among the "greats" of the art. For in the *prooemium* to *Mathesis* 4 we find him placing Abraham in the company of the legendary fathers of astrology: Hermes, Orpheus, and the revered Egyptian *astrologi*, Petosiris and Nechepso.⁸⁰ Had Artapanus and Abraham's other Diaspora champions still been alive they surely would have been amazed, and perhaps a little discomfited, at the success of their campaign to promote their great ancestor as a cultural icon. In the eyes of Maternus, Abraham was literally a god: *divinus ille Abram* is how he describes him at *Mathesis* 4.17.2.⁸¹

In our two remaining sources a different kind of Abraham is in evidence. In these, he is presented as a religious, not a secular figure.⁸² In the pseudonymous and thoroughly unreliable biography of the emperor Alexander Severus (222–235 CE) purportedly written by Aelius Lampridius,⁸³ Abraham makes a fleeting appearance as one of those "holy souls" worshipped daily by that emperor:

His manner of living was as follows: first of all . . . in the early morning hours he would perform cultic acts (*rem divinam faciebat*) at his private shrine (*lararium*). In this he kept statues of deified emperors—of whom, however, only the best had been selected—and also of certain holy souls, among them Apollonius (of

78. *Math.* 4.17.2; 4.17.5; 4.18.1 (= *GLAJJ*, Vol. 2, 474–6).

79. *Math.* 8.3.5, a passage overlooked by Stern.

80. *GLAJJ*, Vol. 2, 473. According to Stern, this pair were believed in antiquity to be not only the joint authors of an astrological handbook but also the writers under their own names of other astrological works. All these works, like the writings attributed to Abraham, were, of course, pseudepigraphic.

81. See *GLAJJ*, Vol. 2, 474.

82. I have decided to exclude from the discussion here the passage in which the Neoplatonist philosopher, Alexander of Lycopolis in Egypt (second half of the third century CE), refers to Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son to God (*Contra Manichæi Opiniones Disputatio* 24 = *GLAJJ*, Vol. 2, 468). Detailed analysis of the vocabulary, syntax, and content of this passage indicates that it was almost certainly a Christian interpolation. See M.J. Edwards, "A Christian Addition to Alexander of Lycopolis", *Mnemosyne* 42 (1989), 483–7.

83. This work is one of the series of pseudonymous imperial biographies belonging to the work generally referred to as the *Scriptores Historiæ Augustæ* (Writers of the Augustan History). Although these biographies purportedly were written by six individuals, modern scholarship is unanimous in believing that it was the work of one man, a late fourth century CE hoaxer. For a recent discussion of this hugely controversial work, see A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapter 20.

Tyana), and, according to a contemporary writer, Christ, Abraham, Orpheus and others of that nature, as well as portraits of his ancestors.⁸⁴

Given the universally accepted unreliability of this source, it is hard to know how much credence to give either to the contents in general of this extract or to Abraham's cultic status in particular. Admittedly, there are several other passages in this biography where reference is made to this emperor's religious inclusivity,⁸⁵ but this may all be part and parcel of the writer's clear attempt to present Alexander Severus as a model ruler.⁸⁶ Consequently, without hard evidence independent of Lampridius for the religious beliefs and behavior of this emperor, it would probably be wiser to suspend belief about both his religious eclecticism and Abraham's divine status.

With our final source, the evidence for Abraham as a religious figure is much stronger. This is the anti-Christian polemic of the emperor Julian, the *Contra Galilaeos*, a work penned at Antioch in the winter of 362/3 CE, and recoverable in parts from the spirited rebuttal of it by Bishop Cyril of Alexandria in the early fifth century CE.⁸⁷ Drawing upon the LXX version of Genesis, a text in which he was well versed owing to his upbringing as a Christian, Julian berates his former co-religionists for the error of their ways. These included their refusal both to build altars of sacrifice and to pay proper attention to divine signals, such as the flight of birds and the appearance of abnormal celestial phenomena.⁸⁸ Since Abraham could, at a stretch,⁸⁹ be shown to have done all these things, his conduct is presented by Julian as a model of correct religious behavior.

Conclusion

From the foregoing it will have been seen that Abraham was a far more "malleable" figure than the law-giver, Moses.⁹⁰ In consequence, he was also a far more useful

84. SHA, Alexander Severus 29.2 (trans. M. Williams) For the Latin text, see GLAJJ, Vol. 2, 522.

85. See, for instance, SHA, Alexander Severus 22.4, with sympathy for both Jews and Christians.

86. R. Syme, *Emperors and Biography: Studies in the "Historia Augusta"* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 155, who elsewhere in this study (e.g., 276) dismisses the reference to Severus' "domestic chapel" as a fable.

87. GLAJJ, Vol. 2, 481a and W.C. Wright, *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, 3 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1923), Vol. 3, 313–17.

88. *Contra Galilaeos* 354A–356C.

89. Although Abraham's sacrificial activity can be documented convincingly, as at Gen. 12:7–8 and 22:9, the evidence for his interpretation of shooting stars and the flight of birds is extraordinarily weak. The only possible references are Gen. 15:5 (stars) and 15:11 (birds).

90. Gruen's term for Abraham. See his *Heritage and Hellenism*, 151.

one. For his story could be manipulated by all manner of people for all manner of positive purposes, such as by Jewish apologists of Diaspora origin, such as Artapanus, to boost their cultural standing vis-à-vis their non-Jewish neighbors. Also, Abraham could be used by the courtier Nicolaus of Damascus, primarily to flatter his patron, and by the anti-Christian polemicist Julian the Apostate, to attack that sect. Hence, there is a largely favorable picture that emerges of this Jewish patriarch from our sources (the only rather negative voice is that of Apollonius Molon whose antipathy to the Jews was notorious).

There were, of course, features in the Abraham story that would not have played well with a Graeco-Roman audience: the preparations the latter made, albeit reluctantly, to sacrifice his son at the behest of his god,⁹¹ and his willingness to undergo circumcision personally, and to agree to the divine command that henceforth it should be the defining mark of his people.⁹² Hence the studious avoidance in the sources discussed above of both these key episodes in the Abrahamic narrative. Although infanticide was widely practiced in both Greek and Roman society, the sacrifice of a child who had been accepted into the family and become an established part of it, was regarded as especially abhorrent.⁹³ No less barbaric did circumcision seem to both Greeks and Romans. The former, for whom the male body in its natural state represented the epitome of perfection, deplored the practice largely on aesthetic grounds.⁹⁴ As for the latter, such was the revulsion with which Romans viewed this “mutilation of the genitals,”⁹⁵ that they actually made circumcision a criminal offence, punishable by exile or death.⁹⁶ Given such attitudes towards child-sacrifice and circumcision, it is hardly surprising that Abraham’s readiness to contemplate the killing of his son and to

91. Genesis 22.

92. Genesis 17.

93. W.V. Harris, “Child-Exposure in the Roman Empire”, *Journal of Roman Studies* 84 (1994): 1–22, here 2–3. Illustrative of the revulsion with which child-sacrifice was viewed, is the prominence accorded the story of Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigeneia, in both Greek and Latin literature (e.g., Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* and Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* 1.84–100) and classical art (e.g., the “Iphigeneia” fresco from the House of the Tragic Poet at Pompeii). On this material, see the discussions at *PW*, Vol. 9.2, s.v. Iphigenia; and J.-M. Croisille, “Le sacrifice d’Iphigénie dans l’art romain et la littérature latine”, *Latomus* 22 (1963): 209–25 (esp. plates XXV–XXX).

94. Schäfer, *Judeophobia*, 105; and K.J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 127–30 (with full discussion at 128–9 of the circumcised penis as a marker of servile and barbarian status in Greek vase-painting).

95. *SHA*, Hadrianus 14.2 = *GLAJJ*, Vol. 2, 511.

96. The offender’s social status determined the penalty. For this legislation and the Jews’ exemption from it, see A. Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press and Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1987), 99–102.

commit his people in perpetuity to the rite of cutting off their foreskins, are not so much as hinted at in the texts discussed above. In the view of their authors it was far better to play up qualities that were admired in Graeco-Roman society, hence their focus on Abraham as a successful military man and, above all, as an astrological authority. The ability to interpret celestial phenomena remained a widely admired skill throughout the entire period considered here, and indeed well beyond.