ARISTEAS AND SOCIAL IDENTITY: CREATING SIMILARITY FROM
CONTINUED DIFFERENCE

Jonathan Numada

Northwest Baptist Seminary at ACTS Seminaries, Langley, BC, Canada

Introduction[1]

Some things get better with age, not the least things biblical. If there is a place the Bible became more flavorful, it was Alexandria, where Alexandrian Jews and Christians creatively put the Bible in dialogue with their city. While it postdates the *Letter of Aristeas*, the pseudepigraphal *Lives of the Prophets* sheds some insight on patterns of 'cultural appropriation' discussed at length in Stavrianopoulou's recent volume on Greek identity.[2] In this case, *Liv. Proph.* 2.1-6 records the colorful post-biblical career of the prophet Jeremiah,[3] who is alleged to have met his end by stoning in the Egyptian town of Daphne. Afterwards, Jeremiah finds posthumous vindication from Gentile rulers, when he is buried in Pharaoh's palace on account of his saving Egypt from a plague of snakes and crocodiles. It gets even better when none other than Alexander the Great exhumes Jeremiah's bones from

1. This article was first presented as a paper at the Hellenistic Judaism section at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting (Atlanta, 23 November 2015). I am grateful for the questions and comments from participants and insights gained from other papers presented at that section.

2. See the essays in Eftychia Stavrianopoulou (ed.), *Shifting Social Imaginaries in the Hellenistic Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

3. For discussion of Jeremiah in reception history, see Christian Wolff, *Jeremia im Frühjudentum und Urchristentum* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1976); and P.M. Fraser, *Cities of Alexander the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 19 n. 19.

Pharaoh's palace and re-buries them in a circle around the newly-founded Alexandria to protect it from snakes and crocodiles.[4]

This Jeremiah legend indicates that those who propagated it assumed four things that can also be found in the *Letter of Aristeas*: (1) that Jews remain similar to but different from Greeks; (2) that the narrative of the diaspora community in Alexandria is in continuity with the narrative of biblical history; and (3) that the city of Alexandria, as a continuation of this biblical narrative, enjoys God's sanction and blessing. The implication is that (4) Jews, as a group consciously holding to a distinct identity, *should* be in Alexandria. The Jeremiah legend indicates that the Greek diaspora Jews behind it likely held to an integrationist, as opposed to an assimilationist, social strategy of accommodation to and participation in Greek Gentile society. I will argue below that the above elements are present in *Aristeas* as well, where participation in the life of Alexandria was re-interpreted as divinely sanctioned, in order to align two social identities that may have been viewed as incompatible.

Social Identity Theory and Social Memory Theory

The levels of social integration, assimilation or isolation (self-imposed or otherwise) among Diaspora Jews remain matters of debate, even though a consensus seems to be emerging that Jewish identity in the Western Diaspora exhibited a degree of self-confidence.[5] Previous

---

4.   Wolff, *Jeremia*, p. 42. Citing Plutarch, *Alex.* 26.5; *Liv. Proph.* 2.5. Plutarch uses κυκλοτερῆ while *Lives of the Prophets* uses κύκλῳ, but both speak of Alexandria's founding.

5.   John M.G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996); D.R. Schwartz, 'How at Home Were the Jews of the Hellenistic Diaspora?', *CP* 92 (2000), pp. 349-57; Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); L.V. Rutgers, *The Hidden Heritage of Diaspora Judaism* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), pp. 20-38; Paul R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). More recently, see the work of Sylvie Honigman, whose scholarship has served as a very influential foundation and dialogue partner for this study, especially Honigman, '"Jews as the Best of All Greeks": Cultural Competition in the Literary Works of Alexandrian Judaeans of the Hellenistic Period', in Stavrianopoulou (ed.), *Shifting Social Imaginaries*, pp. 207-32; *idem*, 'Jewish Communities of Hellenistic Egypt: Different Responses to Different Environments', in Lee I. Levine and Daniel R. Schwartz (eds.), *Jewish*

attempts to engage this issue by means of examining *Aristeas* used methodologies centered in Homi Bhaba's post-colonial paradigm of hybridity,[6] and theories of the 'social imaginary' and 'cultural competition'.[7] Ronald Charles's engagement via hybridity is helpful in that it seeks out intercultural tensions, but suffers to a degree from nomothetism, that is, the hybridity paradigm demands that one seek out instances of ambivalence towards the dominant host culture, although giving voice to this ambivalence does not seem to be a part of *Aristeas*'s agenda. We will see below that one instance of Charles's identification of ambivalence towards the host culture is incorrect. We will also see that Sylvie Honigman's paradigm of 'the Greek Jew' and cultural competition through appropriation, where Jews exhibit themselves as 'the best of all the Greeks',[8] is likely a more accurate representation of *Aristeas*'s social program. Benjamin Wright represents a viewpoint very similar to Honigman,[9] although he stresses explicitly that *Aristeas* maintains that a degree of Jewish separation and distinction should continue in the midst of its alignment with elements from Greek culture.[10] The result is agreement that, at least as can be discerned from *Aristeas*, the writer was culturally quite Greek. The question lies in establishing precisely where to draw the line separating Greek from Jewish identities for *Aristeas*, the significance of the continued difference that *Aristeas* seeks to maintain and the degree to which such findings would be representative.

This article synthesizes two paradigms in an attempt to explore this issue further—Social Identity Theory, here in its Self-Categorization

---

Identities in Antiquity (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), pp. 117-35; and *idem*, *The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria* (London: Routledge, 2003).

6.   Ronald Charles, 'Hybridity and the *Letter of Aristeas*', *JSJ* 40 (2009), pp. 242-59.

7.   Honigman, 'Best of all Greeks', pp. 207-32.

8.   Honigman, 'Best of all Greeks', pp. 207-32.

9.   Benjamin G. Wright, *The Letter of Aristeas: 'Aristeas to Philocrates' or 'On the Translation of the Law of the Jews'* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2015), pp. 65-70; *idem*, 'Cultural Creativity in Egyptian Judaism', in Susan Ashbrook Harvey *et al.* (eds.), *A Most Reliable Witness: Essays in Honor of Ross Shepherd Kraemer* (Atlanta: SBL, 2014), pp. 116-20.

10. In the first genuine commentary on *Aristeas*, Wright discusses Stewart Moore's interpretation of *Aristeas*'s approach to ethnic identity (Wright, *Letter of Aristeas*, pp. 65-70). Unfortunately, this study was not available at the time of writing.

Theory incarnation, and a presentist approach to Social Memory Theory. This study does not represent the only possible application for these two highly adaptable models, but heuristically they may serve as tools that can help answer this question. Furthermore, this article can only speak to what *Aristeas* as a literary work believes to be true, or at least argues *should* be true, in light of the features examined below. However, even if *Aristeas*'s aspirations went unrealized, this methodological approach can still provide a useful basis for interpreting how some diaspora Jews approached their social situation.

Collective and Cultural Memory

As a heuristic device, a presentist approach to collective memory concerns 'memory experience' and 'dialogue with the past', where memory is treated as a constructed past that suits present needs, creating paradigms for interpreting a community's current circumstances.[11] In this presentist perspective, the word 'memory' functions as a metaphor for mechanisms of cultural transmission that reformulates history into simplified, meaningful and psychologically satisfying narratives.[12] Cultural memory is essentially the same process but operates at the cultural level.[13] It is known that cultural groups creatively use their past, in part to develop social identities, through

11. Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003), pp. 9-13; Jan Assman, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique* 65 (1995), pp. 125-33 (130).

12. Misztal, *Social Remembering*, pp. 11-15. Sometimes there are chronological difficulties where present group identities are treated as though they are temporally-local fabrications uninfluenced by past history (Misztal, *Social Remembering*, pp. 52-55), while others argue for such a 'presentist' stance where memories are fabricated by those in power for the sake of social cohesion (pp. 58-61) or prefer to view collective memory as being formulated in dialogue with the past while attempting to meet present needs (pp. 69-82). I will take the approach that treats the formation of memory as a process of negotiation, where it can serve an instrumental function that meets present needs, but does not assume that memories are pure fabrications. Rather, these are created in dialogue with the past while introducing innovative elements. Such an approach acknowledges that collective memories change over time but pre-empts a completely cynical reading of the text, as it allows one to presume continuity with actual events or individuals from the past. However, it also recognizes the tendency to mythologize the past for the sake of emotional appeal to provide order and identity in present experience (pp. 99-100).

13. Misztal, *Social Remembering*, p. 12.

memory distortion or, less pejoratively, innovation.[14] Some historically-situated collective memories are accessible indirectly through material artifacts such as texts or inscriptions,[15] from which inferences regarding social identity may be drawn.

The second paradigm, Self-Categorization Theory (SCT),[16] is a social-psychological theory that can aid in interpreting social dynamics inferred from texts. Much recent scholarship is devoted to identity-related issues, and while usually not presented explicitly as a paradigm, the presuppositions of both SCT and Collective Memory are frequently operative in the background. Like any sociological paradigm used for interpreting texts, SCT can also be subject to accusations of nomothetism,[17] but at least SCT, with its focus on labeling, has the

14. Misztal, *Social Remembering*, p. 17; Michael Schudson, 'Distortion in Collective Memory', in Daniel L. Schacter *et al.* (eds.), *Memory Distortion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 346-64. Distortion refers to intentionally changing understandings of the past, although the pejorative connotations of the term suggest the less objectionable innovation as a synonym. Remembering and forgetting refer to inclusion or exclusion of material in the cultural/collective memory, with forgetting usually occurring due to em-barrassment. For example, Sarah Pearce notes that, in *Antiquities*, Josephus omits the Golden Calf episode in recounting the Exodus, 'forgetting' it. Meanwhile, in *Vit. Mos.* 2.147, 161-62, Philo blames the episode on Egyptians who joined the Israelite Exodus (Sarah Pearce, 'Belonging and Not Belonging: Local Perspectives in Philo of Alexandria', in Siân Jones and Sarah Pearce [eds.], *Jewish Local Patriotism and Self-Identification in the Graeco-Roman Period* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998], pp. 79-105 [91]).

15. Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (trans. Sara B. Young; New York: Macmillan, 2011), p. 104.

16. The most comprehensive application of Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a methodology for studying ancient literature has been done by Philip Esler, who, in his *Conflict and Identity in Romans*, uses multiple paradigms (such as Social Memory Theory and SIT) to interpret Romans. Esler states that he regards social models and paradigms as heuristic tools for understanding the text, rather than ends in themselves (Philip F. Esler, 'Social-Scientific Approaches', in Stanley E. Porter [ed.], *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation* [New York: Routledge, 2009], pp. 337-40 [339]; *idem*, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003], esp. pp. 109-270).

17. That is, providing results that are too broad to be useful, or conclusions that are predetermined by the choice of model employed. See S.E. Porter, 'How Do We Define Pauline Social Relations?', in Stanley E. Porter and Christopher D. Land (eds.), *Paul and his Social Relations* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 7-34 (esp. 14-20), for discussion on some potential shortcomings of applying social-science

virtue of being well suited to the study of texts because of its descriptive character. This means that SCT can be used to study social relationships in texts, and help facilitate socially-descriptive interpretations. SCT understands groups as conglomerates of individuals who operate according to generally agreed upon criteria of similarity,[18] although this can be complicated by individuals bearing multiple social identities for their various life settings.[19] Social identity is therefore a contingent, transient construct, and what is observed of a social group in one text may not be equally applicable to what is exhibited in another text composed by members of the same group. So a text may only speak for itself, and other texts must be consulted to form a more comprehensive picture.

Social categorization of individuals occurs in evaluating one's prototypicality for in-group members, and stereotypicality for out-group members.[20] Prototypes are similar to David Weber's 'ideal type'— these being representative of their group but not necessarily real, historical individuals. Differences emerge depending on the basis of comparison: *prototypicality* is more likely to be attributed to a person, if there is a high degree of perceived inter-class difference (they are very different from out-group members), but also a high degree of intra-class

---

methodologies to ancient texts. See also D.M. Scholer (ed.), *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays by E.A. Judge* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), pp. 127-30; J.T. Sanders, *Schismatics, Sectarians, Dissidents, Deviants: The First One Hundred Years of Jewish-Christian Relations* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1993), pp. 82-151 (113). Social-descriptivist approaches, such as the one attempted here, have the merit of being textually-based, with a more confined scope restricted to social phenomena specifically described in texts under study (Porter, 'Pauline Social Relations', p. 19; also H.C. Kee, *Knowing the Truth: A Sociological Approach to New Testament Interpretation* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989], p. 36). Potential disadvantages are that socially-descriptivist approaches may miss the broader picture or lack strong theoretical frameworks (Porter, 'Pauline Social Relations', p. 20; also Scholer, *Social Distinctives*, pp. 127-42), which I attempt to rectify here.

18. John C. Turner, *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 10.

19. S.M. Nkomo and T. Cox Jr., 'Diverse Identities in Organizations', in S.R. Clegg, C. Hardy and W.R. Nord (eds.), *Handbook of Organization Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1996), pp. 338-56 (348).

20. S. Alexander Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations: The Social Identity Approach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2002), pp. 161-64.

similarity (they are very similar to in-group members).[21] Establishing prototypicality is done through meta-contrast, a process that determines the degree of comparative and normative fit.

People categorize themselves according to clines from abstract, broadly applicable classifications to those that become more narrowly applicable. Generally, individuals tend to embrace intermediate-level group identities because they balance between being too unique or too inclusive. Abstract categorizations usually are less useful for establishing distinct identities, because they may blur the differences between individuals, while narrower or more concrete categorizations allow for a greater degree of uniqueness.[22] Different social categorizations become salient in different contexts, increasing their importance for social identity in that situation,[23] but may not be of relevance in another social context. Whether or not a given categorization for social identity is salient is usually dependent upon factors related to self-interest.[24] As the social context changes, the criteria of similarity also change, causing group members to adjust what they think is salient (relevant) for determining who is similar and

21. S. Alexander Haslam *et al.*, 'When Do Stereotypes Really Become Consensual? Investigating the Group-based Dynamics of the Consensualization Process', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 28 (1998), pp. 757-72; also S. Alexander Haslam *et al.*, 'Contextual Changes in the Prototypicality of Extreme and Moderate Outgroup Members', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 25 (1995), pp. 509-30 (524), where formation of group identities and categories are not solely based upon definition vis-à-vis an outgroup but also in-group consensus.

22. Individual categorizations can render a person too distinct and isolated, if they are the sole categorization that is salient. Likewise, categorizations that are too abstract or inclusive again may render the individual isolated, precisely because they lack distinction. See Marilynn B. Brewer, 'The Social Self: On Being the Same and Different at the Same Time', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 17 (1991), pp. 475-82 (esp. 475).

23. Turner, *Rediscovering*, pp. 45-49.

24. Hogg states that these are '(a) individual motives for self-enhancement (self-esteem) or self-evaluation (uncertainty reduction), (b) the contextual accessibility of specific social categorizations, (c) the accessibility of specific social categorizations in memory, (d) how well a specific categorization accounts for relevant similarities and differences among people (structural or comparative fit), and (e) how well a specific categorization accounts for others' actual behavior (normative fit)'. See Michael A. Hogg and Kipling D. Williams, 'From I to We: Social Identity and the Collective Self', *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 4 (2000), pp. 81-97 (89).

different.[25] Similar social-identity processes are also at work in ethnic and religious categories,[26] and it is important to note that these are phenomenological, so that unless one is exposed to another group that is perceived to be different, these categories will not be salient.[27]

In 'meta-contrast', criteria tend to shift to ensure in-groups maintain a positive self-image.[28] SCT and SIT argue that, in general, individuals try to advance their group's status as a means of advancing their own prestige.[29] They also maintain that, again in general, lower-status groups tend to attempt social convergence with higher-status groups when intergroup boundaries are seen as permeable.[30] To do so, a communicator may over-communicate (emphasize) or under-communicate (play down) similarities or differences to align themselves with the more powerful group. In terms of cultural memory, under-communication may prompt the omission, or 'forgetting', of un-desirable features, thereby creating innovations in the cultural memory. This is more likely when individuals are high-identifiers, who identify

25. Haslam *et al.*, 'Contextual Changes', p. 525.

26. For example, see Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 3rd edn, 2010), pp. 14-69.

27. For example, in the rare case where one has never been exposed to members of another culture, that person is unlikely to be aware that their own culture exists. Eriksen notes cases of African ethnic groups who were unaware that they possessed different ethnicities until the arrival of colonialism. When it was made aware to these groups by colonial authorities that the two parties were different from one another, sometimes simply on account of geography, only then did the relevant factors become salient, and distinct ethnic identities emerged (or were created). See Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, pp. 98-107.

28. Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations*, p. 165.

29. Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations*, pp. 32-40. Earlier expressions of SIT and SCT maintained that this was motivated by the need to maintain self-esteem, although it was contested as to why advancement of the group could improve self-esteem. Later developments broadened the motivational basis to include a spectrum of analogous factors, such as the need to find significance and meaning for existence, in order to reduce ontological anxiety. Reducing uncertainty by providing order to social existence replaced self-esteem as the explanation for why people attempted to advance their in-groups, especially in terms of the group's social position relative to the status of other groups (Matthew J. Hornsey, 'Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory: A Historical Review', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2 [2008], pp. 214-15; Hogg and Williams, 'From I to We', p. 87).

30. Haslam, *Psychology in Organizations*, p. 137.

strongly with their own group. Low-identifiers are less likely to blatantly distort the past for their own ends, but may still 'forget' as high-identifiers would, simply due to ignorance or apathy towards their in-group.[31]

Summary

This study will examine *Aristeas*'s treatment of Alexandrian Jewish cultural memory and its patterns of emphasis and neglect, or 're-membering' and 'forgetting'. This will provide the basis for evaluating certain textual features in *Aristeas* itself. We will take note of what *Aristeas* says about Jewish local history and social setting, and this data will then be interpreted using SCT to describe what sort of Jewish social identity *Aristeas* is advocating, or the letter's social goals. This study will proceed thematically.

Aristeas *on Theology and Recent Jewish History*

Aristeas, a second-century BCE document purported to be narrating third-century BCE events, appears to use a providential interpretation of history to create new cultural memories that undergird a Jewish social identity that will further enable participation in the Ptolemaic regime and Alexandrian civic and cultural life. The interpretation of

---

31. Baljinder Sahdra and Michael Ross, 'Group Identification and Historical Memory', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 33 (2007), pp. 384-95. Brewer argues that in-group favoritism does not necessarily correspond with increased out-group hostility (Brewer, 'The Social Self', pp. 475-82). Sahdra and Ross propose that failures in memory due to ignorance possibly have their origins in schema theory. According to this theory, people remember schemas and paradigms rather than individual pieces of information. Since people are inclined to view the in-group positively, negative aspects of the group's history may be easily forgotten because it is not consistent with the rest of their knowledge about that group. However, this is difficult to prove definitively. In addition, when a well-informed individual omits mention of material, it is likely that some other motive is a factor in its omission. Manstead *et al.* argue that the more closely one identifies with their in-group, the less guilt they are inclined to feel over that group's misdeeds, while low-identifiers with the in-group tend to feel guilt more acutely over said group's misdeeds (Antony S.R. Manstead *et al.*, 'Guilty by Association: When One's Group has a Negative History', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75 [1998], pp. 872-86).

Alexandrian Jewish history in *Aristeas* is made possible by its theology, where *Aristeas*'s God is one who actively, yet subtly, controls and manipulates the established social and created orders to achieve his purposes for his people. *Aristeas*'s God is hidden, but he can be discerned through the consequences of inferred divine actions, where God interacts with human beings, assists their endeavors and responds to their petitions.

An example of this is *Ep. Arist.* 17, where the narrator notes how God influences human psychology and decision making. According to the narrator, God 'rules the heart' (τόν κυριεύοντα κατὰ καρδίαν) and humans are 'turned and swayed again by him' (μεταλλοιοῦται καὶ τρέπεται καὶ πάλιν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ). This is reiterated in *Ep. Arist.* 18-21, where God brings about the emancipation of the Egyptian Jews and preserves the Ptolemaic regime by working through human agents. In *Ep. Arist.* 17, the character Aristeas prays that God would incline the king to set the Jewish slaves free, because in *Ep. Arist.* 18, when motives are rooted 'in piety' (ἐν ὁσιότητι), and human projects are for 'justice and good deeds' (πρὸς δικαιοσύνην καὶ καλῶν ἔργων), God brings human plans to fruition because 'God, who is Lord of all, guides their actions and their designs' (κατευθύνει τὰς πράξεις καὶ τὰς ἐπιβολὰς ὁ κυριεύων ἀπάντων θεός). This is seen further in *Ep. Arist.* 192, where it is said that God grants good petitions, but patiently ignores harmful ones, and again, in v. 199, when it says that God assists the courageous when their intentions are good. In *Ep. Arist.* 195, the highest good is 'the realization that God rules all things, and that in our fairest achievements it is not we ourselves who accomplish our intentions, but God in His sovereignty consummates and guides the actions of us all.' In *Ep. Arist.* 234, it is asserted that everything is fashioned in accordance with God's will, and in v. 239, it is again stated that it is God who brings human efforts to fulfillment. So while *Aristeas* outwardly appears a very human story with little explicit divine intervention, it presents a providential tale behind the translation that is nonetheless miraculous in terms of its subtle realization.

Aristeas also presents a God who can be known through the human faculties. In *Ep. Arist.* 210, the true mark of piety is humans recognizing God's power in creation and properly inferring its ethical implications. That is, knowledge and revelation of the divine is mediated indirectly in a manner similar to how God intervenes in mundane creation, so that knowledge of God outwardly seems a human a-

chievement, even though it remains something indirectly communicated by God.[32] *Aristeas*'s God never acts overtly, yet the reader is to understand that the deity is in complete control, so in this light, the circumstances surrounding the translation are to be taken as signs of divine providence. In combination with the reinterpretation of local history and the drawing of lateral connections between Greek and Jewish social categorizations that are abstracted to make them more broadly applicable in social terms, these beliefs enable *Aristeas* to present a message that advances its social goals of divinely sanctioned social convergence and participation, though not necessarily as-similation. It also allows Aristeas to narrate a providential tale that does not rely on drastically altering relatively recent history or significantly defaming a group of individuals. Rather, *Aristeas* can content itself either by exaggerating known events or by creating events that sound like plausible exaggerations of something that could have been historical.

Aristeas also reinterprets unpleasant, undeniable elements of the past to achieve its desired social present and future. The origins of many Egyptian Jews as slaves or war captives cannot be ignored by local Jews,[33] so *Aristeas* transforms Jewish slavery into a tale of redemption that exonerates both the slaves and the Ptolemaic government at the same time by using the Ptolemaic library building as its occasion.[34] Others at court are made to concur with the main character/narrator that emancipation positively reflects the king as a generous and pious patron, again something which is possible on account of knowledge of

---

32. When it comes to the Law and God's revelation, two studies by Ian W. Scott argue that epistemology and revelation are products of human activity and the intellectual quest, rather than products of explicit, miraculous, divine revelation. Scott is correct in his presentation of this, and it coheres with how God is portrayed as operating generally (Ian W. Scott, 'Revelation and Human Artefact: The Inspiration of the Pentateuch in the Book of Aristeas', *JSJ* 41 [2010], pp. 1-28; *idem*, 'Epistemology and Social Conflict in Jubilees and Aristeas', in Wayne O. McCready and Adele Reinhartz [eds.], *Common Judaism: Explorations in Second-Temple Judaism* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008], pp. 195-213).

33. Jews were taken from Judea and settled in Egypt by Ptolemy's father (*Ep. Arist.* 4). One hundred thousand Jews were removed to subjugate the local Judean population, and then used as garrison troops (*Ep. Arist.* 12-13). Other Egyptian Jews originated as mercenaries and performed similar functions under the Egyptians and Persians (*Ep. Arist.* 13).

34. *Ep. Arist.* 15-18.

God being accessible through human means.[35] The letter further innovates upon the past by claiming the king's father was compelled to enslave Jews to satisfy his soldiers,[36] but the present generous king averts more injustice by compensating the soldiers for their financial losses by increasing their wages.[37] *Letter of Aristeas* 23 describes this action as setting right a historical wrong, yet *Aristeas* sees to it that, even in slavery, Jews are still honoured, when in his letter to the Judean high priest Eleazar, Philadelphus over-communicates or emphasizes the value of his Jewish subjects as courtiers[38] and well-paid garrison troops.[39] Jewish dignity is further emphasized when Jews are said to have always been 'citizens' (πολίτης) of Judea.[40]

Socially speaking, the above categorizes Jews as partners, rather than as servants, of the Ptolemies. Jews prove their loyalty 'when he [Ptolemy] judged their chief men to be loyal' (τοὺς προόντας κρίνας πιστοὺς) in military service by serving as garrison troops over the native Egyptians (*Ep. Arist.* 36), and this helps establish a social dichotomy between Jew-Greek and Egyptian that increases relative similarity between Jew and Greek. *Letter of Aristeas* 36 further grants Jewish citizen-participants an exemplar status in noting that their service was exceptional. Representation of Jews as loyal partners reveals a social strategy where *Aristeas* attempts to change the basis for meta-contrast from ethnic to ideological similarities, so as to show that the prototypical Jew exemplifies the best of Ptolemaic Greek political ideology while, from the author's view, remaining ethnically distinct from Greeks. In terms of relative similarity within the scope of political ideology, *Aristeas* would have us understand Egyptian Jews as being very similar to Greeks, while in terms of relative difference separate Jews from the conquered native Egyptians. The presentation of Jews as exemplary political and military partners of the Ptolemaic Greeks reduces the salience of historical factors that would otherwise emphasize relative difference between Jew and higher-status Greek, but also similarity between Jews and Egyptians; namely, it mitigates similarity between Jew and lower-status Egyptian as both being

---

35. *Ep. Arist.* 19.
36. *Ep. Arist.* 14.
37. *Ep. Arist.* 20.
38. *Ep. Arist.* 37.
39. *Ep. Arist.* 36.
40. *Ep. Arist.* 36.

conquered peoples from the same region with certain shared practices. Nonetheless, it remains that *Aristeas* is situating Jews between these two other social groups, demonstrating a continued Jewish ethnic self-awareness that necessitates social convergence take the form of being presented as exemplars rather than as the same.

Another means *Aristeas* uses to socially elevate Jews is stressing the role of Moses as Judaism's founder, with the apparent goal being that Judaism's beliefs and religious system can now be presented as a human intellectual achievement. Charles has taken Eleazar's exposition on the Law to be a sign of ambivalence to the host culture,[41] but in actuality, this part of the discourse likely reveals further attempts at social convergence through what Honigman and Galinsky call 'cultural appropriation'.[42] *Aristeas* never mentions the patriarchs, and Moses is only directly mentioned once;[43] so while God is acknowledged as the source of the Jewish Law, there is a tendency to portray 'the lawgiver' (ὁ νομοθέτης) as Moses. This seems intended to allow *Aristeas* to elevate Moses and portray him as the founder of the Judean state.[44] Stressing the human element of the Law's origins,[45] in line with the letter's very human view of revelation, allows *Aristeas* to portray the Mosaic Law as a philosophical but human intellectual product.[46] This allows the Law to be used to emphasize several points of potential salience, or perceived similarity of Judaism, by connecting it to aspects

---

41. Charles, 'Hybridity', p. 256.

42. Honigman, 'The Best of all Greeks', p. 213; citing Karl Galinsky, 'The Cult of the Emperor: Uniter or Divider', in Jeffrey Brod and Jonathan L. Reed (eds.), *Rome and Religion: A Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue on the Imperial Cult* (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), pp. 11-13; see also Wright, *Letter of Aristeas*.

43. *Ep. Arist.* 144.

44. For example, *Ep. Arist.* 131-32, 139, 148, 240 speak of a human being as ὁ νομοθέτης. It is acknowledged that God is the ultimate origin of the Law in 312-13.

45. Wright regards *Aristeas* as of little use for determining the LXX's origins, though it provides information on the LXX's later reception history (Benjamin G. Wright, *Praise Israel for Wisdom and Instruction: Essays on Ben Sira and Wisdom, the Letter of Aristeas and the Septuagint* [Leiden: Brill, 2008], pp. 293-95). Wasserstein and Wasserstein make a similar point, 'The *Letter* in itself is historically worthless as a direct historical source' for the LXX's origins (Abraham Wasserstein and David J. Wasserstein, *Legend of the Septuagint* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], p. 26). They add that *Aristeas* is useful for acting as an indirect source for testimony about the background of *Aristeas*'s authors and their social circles (26).

46. E.g. *Ep. Arist.* 139.

of Greek philosophy, ethics and political theory to reduce relative difference between Jew and Gentile. In so doing, Moses is implicitly depicted as the ideal legislator and founder of a Jewish *polis*,[47] so that the differences created by the Jewish laws and lifestyle can be portrayed as reflecting values shared with educated Greeks.[48]

Plato's ideal rational and obedient citizen required instruction in the content and purpose of their polity's laws,[49] with obedience to laws being described as a superlative expression of virtue.[50] *Aristeas* draws a parallel to this so that it can explain the lifestyle derived from the Mosaic Law as a holistic instructive medium that helps Jewish citizens learn their laws in their totality. Eleazar states Moses' legislation fosters 'justice, holy contemplation, and the perfection of character' (144),[51] and describes Moses as a gifted teacher-legislator (131), 'wise and contemplative' (139), who creates legislation that teaches preservation of ethnic identity, virtue and worship simultaneously (139). In Plato, ancestral customs serve as buffers that protect core laws and promote

47. This tendency appears in Philo and has been noted by many (Hywel Clifford, 'Moses as a Philosopher-Sage in Philo', in Axel Graupner and Michael Wolter [eds.], *Moses in Biblical and Extra-Biblical Traditions* [Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2007], pp. 151-67; Louis H. Feldman, 'Philo's View of Moses' Birth and Upbringing', *CBQ* 64 [2002], pp. 258-81). The connection to Plato is also found in Josephus's *Apion* 2.257: μεμίμηται τὸν ἡμέτερον νομοθέτην (he [Plato] imitated our legislator; translation mine). John M.G. Barclay, *Against Apion* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 315, cites Plato, *Prot.* 326c and *Leg.* 810e-811e, 949e-953e as points of contact with this idea of Moses creating the ideal laws for the ideal *polis*. Barclay suggests that Josephus assumes Plato's use of Moses on account of the latter pre-dating the former. This is somewhat less eccentric than Artapanus's claim that Moses taught Greek philosophers and Egyptians religion and technology, essentially founding everything, and being known thereafter as Musaeus or Hermes (Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 9.27.1-37).

48. See also the example where Jewish food laws are explained as a cultural peculiarity not uncommon among different city-states (*Ep. Arist.* 182).

49. In the Greek culture, this would be of high importance and viewed positively, given Plato's statement on the importance of an obedient populace in *Leg.* 718c, and the importance of a populace being instructed so that they understand a polity's laws and the reasons behind their existence (*Leg.* 723a, 888d).

50. Plato, *Leg.* 822e, 847a.

51. Hadas's translation (Moses Hadas, *Aristeas to Philocrates* [repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007]).

the unity of the nation,[52] and *Aristeas*'s presentation of the Law of Moses reflects this concern for the Greek political ideal of ethnic homogeneity.[53] Observant Jews, though they may seem to adhere to peculiar customs, in reality fulfill the ideal of being loyal and rational members of their polity, meaning that in terms of what Plato thinks legislation ought to do, *Aristeas* can claim the Mosaic Law does it best. *Aristeas*'s appeal to political ideals, then, allows it to reinterpret apparent cultural resistance on the part of Jews as exemplifying the ideals of the Greek host culture by placing them under a category that is more socially abstract, meaning the presented underlying rationales can be accepted by both parties.[54]

It is important to note that in terms of social identity, Eleazar's explanation of the food laws reveals that *Aristeas* is a high-identifier with Judaism in terms of in-group bias. Rather than explaining away these differences, *Aristeas* attempts to justify them using culturally acceptable ideas, suggesting these practices noticeably set Jews apart and needed to be explained by Jews to Gentiles on a regular basis. Eleazar also makes passing statements (158) that Jews sometimes dressed differently and that at least some Jewish homes were visibly identifiable.[55] Furthermore, it is the translation of the Law that allows the king to see its wisdom and prompts his further demonstrations of reverence (*Ep. Arist.* 312, 317), again implicitly legitimating *Aristeas*'s categorization of the prototypical Jew as leading a philosophical life. The rather lengthy series of symposia[56] likewise seems intended to

52. For example, see Plato, *Leg.* 949e-950a on the destructive effect of cultural innovation versus faithful preservation of ancestral customs; *Leg.* 793b-d on 'ancestral customs' as buttresses for protecting core laws.

53. See *Ep. Arist.* 139, although *Aristeas* uses the more general terms ἔθος and ἐθισμός (custom), rather than πάτριος (ancestral custom), which carries stronger ethnic connotations and is more frequent in Josephus.

54. This perceived ideological similarity, if not exactly cultural similarity, is also used as an apologetic strategy by Josephus in *Against Apion* and the discussion of Jewish accommodations in *Antiquities*, particularly Nicolaus's speech (*Ant.* 16.31-57), which most likely reflects Josephus's own views.

55. Hadas notes that this likely refers to tassles attached to clothing, and the *Mezuzot* placed on door posts, as per Deut. 6.4-9; 11.13-21 (*Aristeas to Philocrates*, pp. 162-63); also Num. 15.38-39. See also Wright, *Praise Israel for Wisdom*, pp. 314-25.

56. *Ep. Arist.* 183-294. For a rough outline, see G. Zuntz, 'Aristeas Studies I: "The Seven Banquets"', *JSS* 4 (1959), pp. 28-29.

demonstrate that the translators are an urbane group from which the king can benefit. The notion that the king can intellectually benefit from his Jewish subjects demonstrates relative similarity between Jew and Greek on the basis of their shared erudition, meaning that there is a basis for common intellectual ground in that the king and his advisors must be able to recognize true wisdom when they encounter it.

Yet it remains that *Aristeas* uses the distinctive Jewish lifestyle to demonstrate this point of similarity, suggesting again that this portrayal of Jews as 'philosophical' would not meet the criteria of normative fit for Greek culture and must be introduced through constructing a relatively abstract basis for commonality. The conclusion, then, is that, for *Aristeas*, this ideological-philosophical commonality with Greeks is actually a product of their concrete social differences. The care *Aristeas* takes to explain these distinctives using Greek categories to portray Jews as philosophical suggests not bias in favor of Greeks, but high identification with Jews and Judaism held in tension with a desire for the two groups to be understood as similar. This suggests, though does not prove, that Jews in Egypt were generally seen as a distinct social group and that, to a certain point, Jews also saw themselves this way.

This is similar to *Aristeas*'s presentation of Judaism and the Law as an intellectual achievement, which can be studied and appreciated by non-Jews in order to portray knowledge and reverence of God as something that is selectively shared.[57] The Greeks liberate Jewish slaves out of pious motivations (16, 24, 37), while the king himself is labeled as pious on multiple occasions.[58] His pious love of knowledge,[59] which

---

57. See Scott, 'Epistemology and Social Conflict', pp. 195-213; *idem*, 'Revelation', pp. 1-28.

58. Eleazar and company recognize the king's piety (42); reverencing the sacred scrolls by the king is also pious (179). The king is blessed and empowered by God, because he is pious (229, 233, 255).

59. Philo and Josephus are both agreed that the Ptolemaic king in question is Philadelphus, son of Ptolemy Soter. Both describe the king as favorably disposed to Jews. Philo makes no mention of the emancipation story, though Josephus does (*Ant*. 12.17-33). Philo preserves *Aristeas*'s notion of the king as a Judeophile and presents the translation of the LXX as Philadelphus's own idea, based on prior knowledge of the Mosaic Law (*Vit. Mos.* 2.31). Josephus takes a mediating position, where initiative for the translation comes from Demetrius the librarian, who seeks books either valuable or agreeable to the king's interests (*Ant*. 12.12-16). In all three accounts, the king is philosophically-inclined, testing the translators to his satisfaction (*Vit. Mos.* 2.33; *Ant*. 12.99; *Ep. Arist.* 181-294). In each instance, the

naturally results in his respect for the Law, is seen when he 'bowed deeply some seven times' (προσκυνήσας σχεδὸν ἑπτάκις) to the Torah scrolls (177) and weeps at the accolades received for doing so (178). The king again 'bowed deeply' (προσκυνήσας) to the translated Scriptures upon their completion[60] and formulaically and repetitively expresses his delight at each and every exposition of the translator's theocentric philosophical wisdom at the symposia and at the Law upon hearing it read.[61] The apparent intention behind this is to demonstrate the Gentile king's willingness to learn from the theological wisdom Jews acquire through their lifestyle.[62]

In terms of social categorizations, these indicate *Aristeas* attempts to show that the Greek king and those like him should be labeled as pious, though to a lesser degree than Jews. Since the king, Aristeas and Philocrates are all depicted as Gentiles, this suggests the Jewish author of *Aristeas* believes Gentiles can be pious too, though Jews are categorized as having the inside track on piety and knowledge of God on account of being taught by the Law.[63] Again, this indicates high identification with Jewish ethnicity on account of theological beliefs, but also a desire to reduce relative difference between Jew and Gentile on Jewish terms, allowing social convergence without sacrificing Jewish ethnic or religious fidelity. However, it is apparent that *Aristeas* views Jews as a separate group who embody exemplary theological insightfulness, since the passing of knowledge in the narrative occurs in only one direction: from the Jewish characters to the Greek characters.

In the examples so far, *Aristeas* shows that, while Egyptian Jews are different, they are not necessarily foreign to Alexandria. However, *Aristeas* also makes multiple attempts to show that life in Alexandria is

---

king is impressed by the LXX's wisdom, and Josephus and Philo note that the LXX makes Judaism's Laws and 'philosophy' known to the world (*Ant.* 12.110; *Vit. Mos.* 2.43), while Aristeas explains why it had been ignored for so long (*Ep. Arist.* 312).

60. *Ep. Arist.* 317.

61. *Ep. Arist.* 312-16 (esp. 312).

62. Erich Gruen describes this repetitive and formulaic portrayal as a form of mockery, but within the context of cultural appropriation (Erich S. Gruen, 'Jews and Greeks as Philosophers: A Challenge to Otherness', in Daniel C. Harlow *et al.* [eds.], *The "Other" in Second Temple Judaism: Essays in Honor of John J. Collins* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], pp. 402-22).

63. For discussion of the Law teaching Jews important aspects of piety, see *Ep. Arist.* 131, 134, 139, 140, 166.

a continuation of the narrative of Israel. This is partly seen in the portrayal of the king as a generous patron who sends gifts to Eleazar in Jerusalem and contributes to the Jerusalem temple, including Alexandria in the sphere of those who worship God.[64] Further, after the costly emancipation,[65] the king bestows lavish gifts and treatment on the translators,[66] which are probably intended to serve as a contrast to the Pharaoh in an example of what Honigman calls a 'non-Exodus'.[67] The Jewish homeland is used to ascribe Judean citizenship to Alexandrian Jews, in order to balance out their non-citizen status.[68] Jerusalem and its domain are heavily idealized[69] to make Judea qualitatively comparable to Alexandria, though on grounds of it being a theocratic utopia,[70] which is underscored when *Aristeas* heavily romanticizes the sacrificial processes[71] and the High Priest Eleazar.[72]

64. Ptolemy sends an ornate table and other instruments to Jerusalem for temple worship, spending enormous amounts of money and worrying if it will be good enough (*Ep. Arist.* 52-82). According to *Aristeas*, 100 talents of silver are devoted to temple sacrifices (*Ep. Arist.* 33, 40, 42); 50 talents of gold and 70 talents of silver are used to make instruments for temple worship (*Ep. Arist.* 33).

65. The king spends 660 talents of gold emancipating Jewish slaves (*Ep. Arist.* 27).

66. In *Aristeas*, the king pays three talents of silver to each translator for benefitting from their wisdom (*Ep. Arist.* 294) and two more talents of gold for their translation work, as well as providing furniture and other gifts (*Ep. Arist.* 319). *Ep. Arist.* 304 claims the translators received the same care as the king.

67. Honigman, *Septuagint*, pp. 53-56.

68. *Ep. Arist.* 36, 44.

69. Hadas states: 'Every reader would have recognized that he was dealing with an imaginative work and not a history claiming literal truth' (*Aristeas to Philocrates*, 50). While Hadas is likely correct in characterizing *Aristeas* as 'imaginative', apparently, Josephus cannot be attributed the same level of discretion as Hadas would imagine readers would adopt, as Josephus draws on the substance of the Aristeas legend (*Ant.* 12.11-118) in claiming its veracity as a support for considering Jewish Alexandrians as citizens (πολιτεία) and valued allies of the Greeks and Romans in *Ant.* 12.8, 119-24.

70. Tcherikover maintains the description of Jerusalem and Judea is an intertextual reconstruction that presents them in accordance with descriptions in the Hebrew Bible. For Tcherikover, this results in Judea being represented as a theocratic utopia (Victor A. Tcherikover, 'The Ideology of the Letter of Aristeas', *HTR* 51 [1958], pp. 77-78).

71. *Ep. Arist.* 89-95.

72. *Ep. Arist.* 96-99.

Furthermore, the Jordan follows seasonal patterns similar to the Nile,[73] and discriminatory restrictions are placed on the peasantry in Judea as they are in Egypt.[74] Further, as Honigman again observes, Judea consisted of 12 tribes, as did Plato's ideal republic,[75] further aligning Judaism with aspects of Greek political thought. While in reality Eleazar would have been bound to obey the Ptolemaic overlords, in *Aristeas* the diplomacy and lavish protocols show the LXX to be a joint project between equals.[76] Ethnic and citizenship differences are deemed no problem for *Aristeas*, as it is clear that Jews belong to Alexandria as part of an extended in-group of dignified allies, rather than subjugated vassals, socially distinct yet similar enough to be pursuing common goals and values.

The mitigation of Jewish foreigner status is seen further in the letter's more explicit alignment of Alexandria with the biblical narrative. Plutarch, *Alex.* 26.1-14[77] presents an account of the city's founding that incorporates two major Ptolemaic symbols of patronage that would become part of the city's civic identity.[78] Alexander, described by Plutarch as a lover of learning (8.2), settles on a copy of Homer's *Iliad* when asked to place a precious item in a coffer. Next, Homer appears in a vision showing Alexander the island of Pharos, adjacent to where the lighthouse would eventually be constructed, and this allegedly prompts Alexander to found his city at that location. In the Plutarch account, the association of Homer with Pharos acts to sanction the island and lighthouse as metonymic symbols representing Alexandrian civic identity. The historical accuracy of this account notwithstanding, what is important for our purposes is how Alexandrians viewed the Library

---

73. *Ep. Arist.* 116-17. Against Tcherikover, 'Ideology', p. 78, *Aristeas* specifically links it to the patterns of the Nile river (καθὼς ὁ Νεῖλος).

74. *Ep. Arist.* 109-13.

75. *Ep. Arist.* 47-50, 97. See Naomi G. Cohen, 'The Names of the Translators in the Letter of Aristeas: A Study in the Dynamics of Cultural Transition', *JSJ* 15 (1984), pp. 32-64 (62); especially Honigman, *Septuagint*, p. 57. Cf. Plato, *Leg.* 6.759d-e, 771b.

76. *Ep. Arist.* 3, 15. The king sends an embassy (πρεσβεία) to Jerusalem.

77. Plutarch was active in the latter first to early second century CE. The Library was founded sometime in the fourth or third century BCE, possibly during the reign of Philadelphus, the second Ptolemaic monarch, or earlier; the Lighthouse was constructed between 283 and 270 BCE, possibly as early as 297 BCE (P.M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* [3 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972], I, p. 20).

78. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, I, pp. 305-35.

and Lighthouse as civic symbols of their city's prestige. This is a logical inference, as establishing such prestige was the likely intent behind their construction during the earliest stages of Alexandria's existence.

In *Aristeas* and Josephus, Pharos is merely presented as an ideal location for the translation work.[79] In Philo, the island is selected because it is a ceremonially pure site where divine inspiration can come upon the translators—now depicted as prophets—and later served as the location of an annual festival celebrating the LXX.[80] While Josephus's direct use of *Aristeas* may mean both should be counted as a single historical witness, the increase of Pharos's significance in the Philo account shows there was a desire to claim the island—a symbol of Alexandrian civic identity—as a Jewish symbol. Likewise, Homer and the coffer in Plutarch likely function as symbolic representations for the library, again suggesting the importance of this institution and its related tradition of Alexandrian scholarship to Alexandrian civic identity. This prompts the question, why does the Jewish writer of *Aristeas* incorporate these two civic symbols into the narrative of the LXX legend? What does Philo mean in claiming that the island is where inspiration came to the translators, commemorated later in festivals that attracted both Jews and Gentiles?

It is highly likely that here the LXX is being used as a tool for synthesizing Jewish ethnic and civic identities by connecting the Hebrew-Greek Bible, symbol of Jewish religious identity, to the two major symbols of Alexandrian civic identity. The translation site and its *raison d'être* serve as a link between being Jewish and being Greek-Alexandrian, allowing their mutual association through their use in *Aristeas*'s newly formulated 'cultural memory' of the Septuagint's beginnings. In such a context, *Aristeas*'s idea of a God in control behind the scenes of human action makes such a presentist reading of Alexandrian and local Jewish cultural memory plausible. The effect of implicitly associating the Lighthouse with the translation, and explicitly associating the translation with the Great Library, is that *Aristeas* 'Judaizes' Alexandria by placing it in continuity with the narrative, which the Hebrew Bible represents, so that it is no longer foreign to its Jewish residents.

---

79. *Ant.* 12.103-104; *Ep. Arist.* 301.
80. *Vit. Mos.* 2.34-41.

The act of translating the Hebrew Bible, in *Aristeas*'s presentation, connects it with Alexandria's cultural, political and civic spheres to link it with the core identities of the city. In terms of the cultural sphere, this is achieved through placing it in the library at the library manager's request, explaining the Law's philosophical nature and associating it with the city's intellectual life by means of connecting it to the library. Politically, this is demonstrated through involving the king and his courtiers. In terms of the civic sphere, the connection is made via the island serving as the translation site, and again, by placing it in the library. *Aristeas* appropriates the best of Greek social values and institutions but applies them in ways amenable to Jewish values, history, theology and the symbolic use of space. Likewise, *Aristeas* claims the quintessential symbols of Alexandria and ascribes them a new Jewish significance that legitimates the existence of the Alexandrian Jewish community, which some may have seen as being in exile (e.g. *3 Macc.* 6.10), but which now is in continuity with biblical history.

Conclusion

In this study, I have attempted to selectively examine *Aristeas's* presentation of social identity using Social Memory Theory and Self-Categorization Theory. We saw that, in *Aristeas*, Jews continue as a separate group of people, and that the letter's author attempts to maintain continued difference while balancing this with a desire for social convergence.

In discussing Jewish cultural practices and history, *Aristeas* creates similarity between Greeks and Jews by appealing to common values that could be embraced by a broader social spectrum of people, rather than by making one group appear more like the other. This allows *Aristeas* to socially abstract the significant differences between the groups to connect the best of the Alexandrian cultural legacy with the foundational text of Judaism itself, albeit without actually making the two parties the same. Thus, we may infer that *Aristeas* is attempting to chart a middle course that would be acceptable to both high- and low-identifiers with Judaism. For the low-identifiers it presents means for understanding Judaism as similar to Greek culture and ameliorating the need to abandon Judaism, but for the high-identifiers it presents a continued means for remaining distinct and faithful to the Law while

still engaging the host culture. Whether or not *Aristeas* succeeded cannot be determined from the *Letter* itself.

These observations partially affirm many of Charles's observations, though not necessarily his characterization of *Aristeas* as creating a hybrid mixture, or 'third space'.[81] When examined through the rubric of Self-Categorization Theory and Social Memory, this document reveals a social strategy that more closely resembles Sylvie Honigman's 'Greek Jew', her presentation of cultural appropriation and the self-portrayal of Jews as 'the best of all Greeks'. This is because, while *Aristeas* shows it understands Jews as a separate group of people, which suggests a degree of distinction from the host culture, its predominant strategy for discussing this difference is to use it to present Jews as best representing shared values. So rather than interpreting the goal of *Aristeas*'s construction of Jewish identity as mixing or blending cultures, which it most certainly did, it is perhaps better to maintain that its social strategy is to create similarity out of difference to foster an alignment, rather than a merging, of two groups which may otherwise have been at odds.

---

81. Charles, 'Hybridity', p. 259.