Jewish Literature of the Greco-Roman Period — Exam 2  
Spring, 2007

The following questions will be “fair game” for the second exam. Four of these will constitute the exam.

1. Adherence to dietary scruples made Jews conspicuous in the Hellenistic era. Summarize how the High Priest Eleazar, in the Letter of Aristeas, and the author of Joseph and Aseneth each defend the value of the dietary codes. In particular, identify the most likely audience each of them addressed and how the answer each gave was intended to affect that audience.

2. Aristobulus, like Philo of Alexandria, found in the Torah’s statements deeper truths than the face value of the words. Explain how each of the following excerpts is an example of that and why an author like Aristobulus took such pains to identify such “deeper truths.”

“For it is necessary to take the divine ‘voice’ not as a spoken word, but as the establishment of things. Just so has Moses called the whole genesis of the world words of God in our Law. For he continually says in each case, ‘And God spoke and it came to pass.’ And it seems to me that Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato with great care follow him in all respects. They copy him when they say that they hear the voice of God when the contemplate the arrangement of the universe.”

“And the legislation has shown plainly that the seventh day is legally binding for us as a sign of the sevenfold principle which is established around us, by which we have knowledge of human and divine matters. And indeed all the cosmos of all living beings and growing things revolves in series of sevens.”

3. a) What features of the book of Judith identify it as a Hellenistic romance? b) How can we explain the sort of prominence Judith (like other heroines of Hellenistic novels) holds – even outstripping her male colleagues – given the predominantly patriarchal culture in which the work was written?

4. a) The book of Fourth Macabbees attempts to prove that “devout reason” can rule over the passions. Why is this such a large issue for the author? b) The majority of the Testaments of the Twelve, while not trying to ground the issue philosophically, also endorse piety exercised in control of the passions. What specific issue evokes this theme in several of the Twelve, and how do they address it? c) What features make testamentary literature (like the Testaments of the Twelve) distinct from apocalyptic literature?

5. a) In what sense can the Testament of Job be considered similar to apocalyptic? b) How does the story of the cords Job gives his daughters before his death accentuate the book’s central assertions? c) While both the Testament of Job and the Life of Adam and Eve highlight the role played by a cosmic proponent of evil,
how does the Life of Adam and Eve specially account for his origins?

6. a) How is afterlife depicted differently in 4th Macabbees than in 2nd Macabbees, from which the former took its story of the martyrdom of Eleazar and the seven brothers?  b) How does the Life of Adam and Eve try to bridge the differences between these portrayals?  c) What change(s) in perspective do all of these views of afterlife register from Qoheleth, which we read at the start of the term?

7. a) Philo describes philosophy as “the mother of all Jews” and “the true spirit of Judaism.” And yet, on other occasions he reports mystical experiences which he says are the source of his ideas. How do we reconcile “Philo the philosopher” with “Philo the mystic”?  b) Like Aristobulus, Philo interprets the Torah allegorically. If Philo were to have had a conversation with Aristobulus, how might he have responded to Aristobulus’ contention that while philosophers are able to gain profound meaning from the Torah through allegorical interpretation, the Torah profits little those who insist on taking it literally?

8. a) Identify three features of Tobit demonstrating that it, like Judith, belongs to the genre of the Hellenistic Romance.  b) Provide two examples of the book of Tobit’s interest in divine orchestration of events, both in fulfilling ancient prophecy and in the events of Tobit’s life.

9. Both the Letter of Aristeas and the fragments of Aristobulus posit a link between Hebrew thought and Greek thought.  a) How do they account for the claim that the Torah contains the most profound wisdom, and yet the Greek philosophers also propound its ideas?  b) How is Aristobulus's denial that the dietary codes have metaphorical meaning more radical than that of Philo?

10. As for the Book of Jubilees, a) what overarching theme guides its expansion of biblical narratives and b) how does the recurrent reference to the “heavenly tablets” contribute to that theme?  c) How is the Book of Jubilees allied with other early Jewish literature in making the calendar a crucial issue?