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“... using different names, as Zeus and Dis” (Arist 16)

Concepts of “God” in the Letter of Aristeas

The “Letter of Aristeas” recounts the translations of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Probably originating in the 2nd century BCE¹, the book tells a legend of how the translation of the Torah into Greek came into being. This shows that translating a holy, canonical text or the first time needed explanation. Notably, the translation of the godly *nomos* (Arist 3) comparatively takes up little space (Arist 301–307). And it has to be noted, that “God” is seldom a topic in the Book of Aristeas. The word (ὁ) θεός “God” is found in only three contexts: in the dialogue between king Ptolemaios and Aristeas (Arist 15–21), in the dialogue of the high priest Eleazar and Aristeas (Arist 121–171; above all 128; 130–141; 155–166; 168) and in the question-and-answer-speech during the symposium at the Ptolemaic royal court between the king and the Jewish scholars (Arist 184–294).

In analysing the different statements regarding God, the frame of the narrative is of decisive importance: In the Book of Aristeas, “Aristeas” (Ἀριστέας), who writes in Greek, presents himself as the author, but he is also part of the story. Accordingly, Aristeas is the narrator, who tells the story from his own point of view, and at the same time, he is a character in the ‘world’ of the text. This Aristeas presents himself as a Greek and a Non-Jew (Arist 16; 121–171), who already wrote a book (Arist 6) and plans further publications (Arist 322). In the double-role as narrator of the text and protagonist in the text, Aristeas has to be differentiated from the (real) writer/author of the Book of Aristeas, who possibly was Jewish.²

¹ RAJA SOLLAMO, The Letter of Aristeas and the Origin of the Septuagint, in: Taylor, Bernard A. (Hg.), X. Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies, Oslo 1998 (SCSt 51), 2001, 329–342, 331–334.

² WRIGHT, BENJAMIN G., The Letter of Aristeas. “Aristeas to Philocrates” or “On the Translation of the law of the Jews” (CEJL), Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter 2015: “*Aristeas*’s author cannot be identical with the narrator” (16). “By writing in the voice of a Gentile narrator, our author reassures his educated Jewish co-ethnics/religionists that the Gentile who occupy the upper strata of Hellenistic Alexandrian society understand and accept Jews as *Jews*” (19). “For our author, a Gentile voice communicates that confidence best” (20). Therefore, Wright uses the following definition: “I designate the Book as *Aristeas* (using italics), our author as Ps. Aristeas, and his main character as Aristeas (without

That means that the (real, probably Jewish) author of the Book of Aristeas presents (or invents) “Aristeas” and gives him the role of the narrator of his text.³ The author portrays Aristeas as a Greek, non-Jewish character, who is a servant of the royal court. This differentiation between narrator and writer/author is of crucial importance for the question of the different conceptions of God in the Book of Aristeas.

1. The conversation between king Ptolemaios and Aristeas (Arist 15–21)

The word “God” appears in the Book of Aristeas for the first time when Aristeas addresses the king (Arist 15–21): The idea arises between the king and his librarian Demetrios to enrich the Alexandrian library with a translation of the Jewish law, Aristeas sees the opportunity to ask the king for the liberation of the 100.000 Jewish prisoners of war, who live in Egypt. The narrator Aristeas tells what he says to the king: “¹⁵... But with a perfect and bounteous spirit release those confined in hardships, since the god who established the law for them directs the kingdom for you, just as I have discovered through investigation. ¹⁶These people revere God, the overseer and creator of all things, whom all, even we, also worship, O King, using different names, Zeus and Dis (προσωνομάζοντες ἑτέρως Ζῆνα καὶ Δία). Not dissimilar to this, the first people signified that one through whom all things are endowed with life and come into being, as guiding and having lordship over all things.”⁴ So while advocating for the liberation of the prisoners of war, Aristeas argues that the same God, who has given them their law, also guides the King’s kingdom, “as I have discovered through investigation” (Arist 15). In other words: Aristeas sees an analogy between his God and the Jewish God. To understand this statement (Arist 15 and 16), one has to remember the speech situation: The identification is made by Aristeas with his Greek-pagan perspective. That means that the analogy Aristeas draws is not a Jewish, but a Greek-pagan statement. As many scholars identify the narrator Aristeas with the (probably) Jewish

quotation marks)” (20). Cf. WRIGHT, BENJAMIN G., Pseudonymous Authorship and Structures of Authority in the Letter of Aristeas, in: Géza Xeravits (Hg.), Scriptural Authority in Early Judaism and Ancient Christianity (DCLS 16), Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013, 43–62.

³ Suchlike *Sylvie Honigman*: “The fictional identity of *B.Ar.*’s narrator introduces an important shift as compared to the real author. The real author was most probably a learned Alexandrian Jew, but the fictional identity he takes on is that of a Greek courtier of Ptolemy II.”, HONIGMAN, SYLVIE, *The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria. A Study in the Narrative of the Letter of Aristeas*, London 2003, 69.

⁴ The translation follows WRIGHT, BENJAMIN G., *The Letter of Aristeas* (CEJL).

writer, they understand Arist 15–16 as a Jewish statement. But I want to propose a different understanding of Arist 15–16: The (probably Jewish) author of the Book of Aristeas presents the Greek-pagan Aristeas, who draws the analogy between his own and the Jewish God.

Fundamental for the argumentation of Aristeas is the function of the deity, which he describes as “the overseer and creator of all things” (πάντων ἐπόπτην καὶ κτίστην). “Overseer and creator” are rarely used Jewish descriptions for the God of Israel. They are mainly found in those books of the LXX, which are not translated, but have been written in Greek.⁵ God as “overseer” (ἐπόπτης) is also known in the Greek tradition (i.e. Epicharmos: “He Himself is our overseer and nothing is impossible to Him, God”, fragment 23).⁶ According to Aristeas God has the same function in the Jewish as in the Greek context: He is the creator and overseer of all things. The only difference is God’s name: In the Greek context, God is called “Zeus”. As Aristeas points out, this only is a different choice of name (προσωνομάζοντες ἑτέρως), not a theological shift. He points out that even the Greeks have different names for the same God: Ζῆνα καὶ Δία “Zeus and Dis”. In a subtle wordplay with the two different forms of the accusative of Zeus, Aristeas elucidates the inner connection of the two – at first sight – different names, which he explains etymologically: “Not dissimilar to this, the first people signified that one through whom (διὰ δια) all things are endowed with life (ζωοποιοῦνται → “to live” ζῆν zēn) and come into being, as guiding and having lordship over all things” (Arist 16). This etymological interpretation of the verb “to live” (ζῆν) can also be found e.g. by Diodorus Siculus III 61,5 when speaking about Zeus: “In return for all this, after he had passed from among men he was given the name of zēn”⁷.

⁵ Next to Arist 16 in the LXX and apocryphic literature “overseer” (ἐπόπτης) is in view of God only used in Esth D 2^{LXX}; 2 Macc 3:39; 7:35; 3 Macc 2:21; παντεπόπτης is used only once in 2 Macc 9:5 (ὁ δὲ παντεπόπτης κύριος ὁ θεὸς τοῦ Ἰσραηλ).

“creator” (κτίστης), actually “founder” (of cities), is only found in 2 Macc 1:24; 7:23; 13:14; 2 Sam 22:32^{LXX}; Jdt 9:12; 4 Macc 5:25; 11:5; Sir 24:8 cf. SCHMITZ, BARBARA, *Geschaffen aus dem Nichts? Die Funktion der Rede von der Schöpfung im Zweiten Makkabäerbuch*, in: Tobias Nicklas/Korinna Zamfir (Hg.), *Theology of Creation in Early Judaism and Ancient Christianity. In Honour of Hans Klein (DCL.St 6)*, Berlin 2010, 61–79; Bons, Eberhard/Passoni *Dell’Acqua, Anna*, A Sample Article: κτίζω – κτίσις – κτίσμα – κτίστης, in: Bons, Eberhard/Joosten, Jan, *Septuagint Vocabulary. Pre-History, Usage, Reception (Septuagint and Cognate Studies 58)*, Atlanta 2011, 173–187.

⁶ The counting and translation of the fragment follows DIELS, HERMANN/KRANZ, WALTHER (Hg.), *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker Bd 1–3*, Berlin ⁶1951/⁶1952/⁶1960.

⁷ Cf. GOULD, G. P., *Diodorus of Sicily. With an English translation by C. H. Oldfather, II*, Cambridge/Massachusetts 1979, 285.

Philosophical concepts

Even more interesting than the etymological interpretation is the fact that Aristeas identifies God, “whom all, even we, also worship” with the God of the Jews, God just has a different name. Precondition for the one-God-position is the idea that behind different deities only one God exists. This idea is often connected with the εἷς θεός-formula⁸ or with the reflexion about “the One” (ἓν).⁹ The first to use the εἷς θεός-formula is Xenophanes (in the middle of the 6th century BCE), who is critical about too anthropomorphic conceptions of God and instead presents the following idea: “Of the first, he said that God is One (εἷς θεός), among gods and men the greatest” (fragment 23).¹⁰ For Xenophanes this one God has no name. This is different for Heraclitus (6th century BCE), who reflects about the One (“all things are one” ἓν πάντα εἶναι fragment 50) and, on the background of his pantheistic approach, calls this “One” Zeus: “One thing (ἓν), the only wise thing, is unwilling and willing to be called by the name Zeus (Ζῆνος ὄνομα).”¹¹ In the Stoa this discussion of the Presocratics is continued, but in a slightly different way. Zeno of Citium (335–262 BCE), who rates as the founder of the Stoa, continues this thought: “God is one and the same with Reason, Fate, and Zeus (Δία); he has also called by many other names (προσωνομάζεσθαι).” (Diog. laert. VII 135,136).¹² In his physical system Zenon understands the cosmos (κόσμος) as an autonomous system in which an active and a passive principle are at work. Zeno identifies the active principle with reason (λόγος), destiny/fate (εἰμαρμένη *heimarmene*), providence (πρόνοια *pronoia*), but also with God (θεός), Zeus or the power of thoughts of Zeus.¹³ “Die Welt wird also durch die göttliche Vorsehung regiert, und zwar gibt es nur einen Gott, eben die in allen Dingen wirkende und formende Vernunft. Trotzdem wollten die Stoiker die Volksreligion mit ihrem Polytheismus keineswegs angreifen, sondern sie versuchten, sie mit ihrem Pantheismus in Einklang zubringen, indem sie die griechischen

⁸ Cf. to the following the study of STAUDT, DARINA, *Der eine und einzige Gott. Monotheistische Formeln im Urchristentum und ihre Vorgeschichte bei Griechen und Juden* (NTOA 80), Göttingen 2012.

⁹ In the following only those philosophical traditions are considered, which originate before the composition of the Book of Aristeas, i.e. not the many late traditions like Cicero, Proclus, Celsus etc.

¹⁰ See FREEMAN, KATHLEEN, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers. A companion to Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Second Edition, Oxford 1966, 95.

¹¹ Cf. *Heraclitus*, *Fragments. A text and translation with a commentary* by T.M. Robinson, Toronto/Buffalo/London 1987.

¹² Cf. GOOLD, G. P., *Diogenes Laertius. Lives of Eminent Philosophers. With an English translation* by R. D. Hicks, II, Cambridge/Massachusetts 1979, 241.

¹³ Cf. STEINMETZ, PETER, *Die Stoa*, in: Flashar, Helmut (Hg.), *Die Philosophie der Antike. Band 4: Die hellenistische Philosophie*, Basel 1994, 535.537.539.606.

Götter allegorisch erklärten als verschiedene Erscheinungsweisen der einen uns selben Vernunftgottheit, die fälschlich für selbstständige Götter gehalten wurden.¹⁴

Zenon's identification of reason (*λόγος*), destiny/fate (*είμαρμένη heimarmene*), providence (*πρόνοια pronoia*), God (*θεός*) and Zeus, is adopted by his students (Cleanthes, Chrysippos and others). The idea of the many names of Zeus is expressed by the Zenon-student Cleanthes of Assos (died 230/229 BCE) in a hymn to Zeus (aprox. 280 BCE), which he probably wrote for a celebration in the stoic school and in which he unites traditional and mythological motifs with ideas of Greek philosophers, esp. with a Stoic interpretation of Heraclitus: "1Noblest of immortals, many-named (*πολυώνυμε*), always all-powerful 2Zeus, first cause and ruler of nature, governing everything worth your law, 3greetings!"¹⁵ In this well-known¹⁶ hymn the stoic 'god' is at the same time called "Zeus". This God is praised as "many-named". In this hymn, "Zeus" is not the Olympic God, but has the „Funktion einer Chiffre, die auf das Göttliche hinweist“¹⁷. Within the hymn of Zeus his unique power of creation is praised (v. 18–21). Likewise, Chrysipp of Soloi (281/277–208/204 BCE) also describes the deity as without a human form or gender, but as eternal and everlasting logos, which can be called "Zeus".¹⁸

The idea of different names for one deity can also be found regarding Isis. There are quite similar wordings in the Isis-Hymn of Isidorus (hymn 1,14–28).¹⁹

"All mortals who live on the boundless earth,
Thracians, Greeks and Barbarians,
Express your fair Name, a Name greatly honoured among all, (but)
Each (speaks) in his own language, in his own land.
The Syrians call You: Astarte, Artemis, Nanaia,
The Lycian tribes call You: Leto, the Lady,

¹⁴ HOSSENFELDER, MALTE, *Stoa, Epikureismus und Skepsis, Philosophie der Antike* 3, München ²1995, 85.

¹⁵ The translation follows THOM, JOHAN C., *Cleanthes' Hymn to Zeus. Text, Translation, and Commentary (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 33)*, Tübingen 2005, 40.

¹⁶ In this form Act 17:28 (*ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ ζῶμεν καὶ κινούμεθα καὶ ἐσμέν, ὡς καὶ τινες τῶν καθ' ὑμᾶς ποιητῶν εἰρήκασιν-τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἐσμέν*) cites v. 4 from the Zeus-Hymn of Cleanthes (v.4: *ἐκ σοῦ γὰρ γένος ἐσμέν*).

¹⁷ RÖD, WALTER, *Geschichte der Philosophie. Philosophie der Antike: Von Thales bis Demokrit*, Bd. 1, München ²1988, 88, cf. POHLENZ, MAX, *Die Stoa. Geschichte einer geistigen Bewegung*, 2 Bd, Göttingen ⁵1978, 98.108.

¹⁸ Cf. STEINMETZ, PETER, *Die Stoa*, in: Flashar, Helmut (Hg.), *Die Philosophie der Antike. Band 4: Die hellenistische Philosophie*, Basel 1994, 609.

¹⁹ VANDERLIP, VERA F., *The four Greek Hymns of Isidorus and the cult of Isis*, Toronto 1972, 18.

The Thracians also name You as Mother of the gods,
 And the Greeks (call You) Hera of the Great Throne, Aphrodite,
 Hestia the goodly, Rheia and Demeter.
 But the Egyptians call You 'Thiouis' (because they know) that You, being One, are all
 Other goddesses invoked by the races of men.
 Mighty One, I shall not cease to sing of Your great Power,
 Deathless Saviour, many-named, mightiest Isis,
 Saving from war, cities and all their citizens.
 Men, their wives, possessions, and children."

In the Jewish literature up to the 2nd century BCE there is only one, although not quite similar idea: Aristobul rephrased in the didactic poem by Aratos of Soloi (aprox. 310–245 BCE) and substitutes "Zeus" (Διός) by "God" (θεός) (Praep Ev XIII 12,3–8 = fragment 4).²⁰

This philosophical, especially Stoic context seems to be the background for the statement from Arist 15–16, namely the idea that there is one Deity with the name "Zeus" and his comprehensive function as overseer and creator. It seems that the statement of Aristeas is not a Jewish position in disguise, but characterizes the Greek Aristeas as a philosophically, maybe Stoic educated character. Accordingly, in the conversation between Aristeas and the king (Arist 15–16.17–21.22), it is Aristeas, a learned Greek, who gives voice to these ideas. Thus it becomes obvious that the Book of Aristeas adopts a widely acknowledged Hellenistic theological idea. Therefore, one can hardly say that the position of Arist 15–16 is a widely acknowledged *Jewish* tradition, but rather, that philosophical-stoical thoughts from a Hellenistic environment were known in Jewish circles.

It is interesting to note that within the Book of Aristeas the philosopher Menedemos of Eretria (Arist 201) appreciates the answers of the first ten Jewish scholars at the end of the first day: "For since all things are governed by providence (πρόνοια), and assuming this correctly, that human beings are created by God, it follows that all sovereignty and beautiful speech have a starting point in God." Here, not only God's function as creator is mentioned, but "providence" (πρόνοια) is seen as the fundament of everything and appears – like in the stoa – as the equivalent of reason (λόγος), destiny/fate (εἰμαρμένη *heimarmene*), God (θεός) or Zeus.²¹ It seems to be the case that whenever the protagonist Aristeas speaks of "God", he means "Zeus" – however probably not the father of the gods

²⁰ WALTER, NIKOLAUS, Fragmente jüdisch-hellenistischer Exegeten: Aristobulos, Demetrios, Aristeas (JShrZ III 2), Gütersloh 1975. – Regarding the question of the dating and order of the Book of Aristeas and Aristobul cf. MÜLLER, MOGENS, Motive der Septuaginta bei Aristobul und ihre Intention (in diesem Band S. 717–732 [720–724]).

²¹ "Providence" (πρόνοια) is in the Book of Aristeas only used in reference to the royal welfare (Arist 30.80.190).

respectively the Olympic Deity but rather the abstract, philosophical-inclusive concept of God.

This reading has implications for the understanding of Arist 17–20.21:

“¹⁷The king did not wait for a long time, but we prayed to God (πρὸς τὸν θεόν) inwardly, since they are a creation of God (κτίσμα γὰρ ὃν θεοῦ τὸ γένος τῶν ἀνθρώπων), is also changed and returned around again by him. Therefore in many and diverse ways I called upon the one who has lordship over the heart, that the king might be compelled, just as I asked, to bring it about. ¹⁸For I had great hope, having brought forward an argument concerning the salvation of people, that God (ὁ θεός) would effect the fulfillment of those things that I had asked. For whatever people think to do through pious disposition for righteousness and attention to good works, God who has the lordship over all, directs their actions and designs (ἐπιβολὰς ὁ κυριεύων ἀπάντων θεός). ¹⁹... Sosibius and certain others present said, ‘It is also worthy of your generosity that you dedicate the release of these people as a thank-offering to the supreme god’ (τῷ μεγίστῳ θεῷ)” (Arist 17–19).

Since this dialogue takes place in an exclusively Greek setting at the royal court, the phrase “the supreme god” can only refer to the God with the name “Zeus”. That means that Aristeas prays to *his* supreme God, which is not the Jewish God, as Aristeas is a Gentile courtier.²² Like in Arist 16 the deity in Arist 17 is addressed in its function as creator. God as Creator is well-known in Greek theological conceptions e.g. by Xenophanes (fragment 23 see above). Likewise, the phrase “the supreme god” (τῷ μεγίστῳ θεῷ) is widely used and can be found e.g. by the philosopher Onatas (arguably 3rd century BCE).²³ It is interesting to note that the LXX only rarely uses the description of God as μέγιστος (not very often).²⁴

To sum up: The scene between Aristeas and the king (Arist 15–21) is a Greek and non-Jewish conversation. Aristeas represents a position which is inspired by philosophy, probably by Stoic thinking, which can be paraphrased like this: Behind all Gods known from mythology and tradition, there is just one deity. This deity can be named “Zeus” or differently.

If and in which way this Greek-Hellenistic position is appreciated from a Jewish perspective within the Book of Aristeas, is discussed in the subsequent chapters of the Book of Aristeas, as I will show on the basis of the other mentions of “God”.

²² Wright points out that Aristeas prays “to God, obviously the Jewish God”, WRIGHT, *The Letter of Aristeas* (CEJL), 130.

²³ Cf. STAUDT, *Der eine und einzige Gott*, 36–37.

²⁴ Esth E 16 υἱοὺς τοῦ ὑψίστου μεγίστου ζῶντος θεοῦ; 2 Macc 3:36 ἔργα τοῦ μεγίστου θεοῦ; 3 Macc 1:9 τῷ μεγίστῳ θεῷ; see 3 Macc 1:16; 3:11; 4:16; 5:25; 7:22.

On the Egyptian background the phrase “greatest God” reminds Jews of the temple in Leontopolis, which is dedicated to the “*theos megistos*”, the greatest God (τῷ μεγίστῳ θεῷ Josephus Ant 13,64–70).

An inscription of dedication from the synagogue of Athribis (Nile Delta) from the 2nd century is dedicated to the greatest God, “*theos hypsistos*” (CIJ II 1443).

2. The mentioning of “God” in the communication between Jerusalem and Alexandria (Arist 34–50; 128–171)

The next part of the book, in which “God” is the topic, is the correspondence between the king and the high priest Eleazar (2.1.). As result of this correspondence, the king sends a delegation from Alexandria to the high priest in Jerusalem, where the high priest answers their questions elaborately (2.2.).

2.1. “God” in the correspondence between the king and Eleazar (Arist 37.42.45)

The correspondence between the king and the high priest Eleazar consists of a letter of the king to the high priest Eleazar (Arist 35–40; “God” in Arist 37) and the answer of Eleazar (Arist 41–50; “God” in Arist 42 and 45). There is one reference to “God” in the letter of the king, that can be found in the section regarding the liberation of the prisoners of war:

“...deciding to do this as a pious act (εὐσεβῶς) and offering a thank-offering (χαριστικὸν) to the supreme god (τῷ μεγίστῳ θεῷ), who has maintained the kingdom for us in peace and in most excellent reputation throughout the entire world” (Arist 37).

The king qualifies his deed, the liberation of the 100.000 prisoners of war, as an act of piety (εὐσέβεια) and as a “thank-offering” (χαριστικός) to the supreme God (τῷ μεγίστῳ θεῷ). Therewith, the king himself interprets his deed as a deed of a good king: He is just, pious and philanthropic (φιλόανθρωπος in Arist 36, see Arist 208).²⁵

The same interpretation can be found in the edict of the king for the liberation of the prisoners of war: “Thus, since we are acknowledged to apportion justice (τὸ δίκαιον) to all people, but even more to those who are unreasonably oppressed, and since we strive in everything to attend well to justice and piety in all things (πρὸς τε τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὴν κατὰ πάντων εὐσέβειαν)... ” (Arist 24). Later on, εὐσέβεια becomes an important topic regarding the question of a good governance (Arist 210.215.229.233.255.261). The keyword χαριστικός (thank-offering) can also be found in the context of the king’s question regarding generosity (φιλοτιμία) in Arist 227. The king shows these ideal traits before “the supreme God”. As a statement of the Ptolemaic king the phrase “the supreme God” is to be understood as discussed above in Arist 15–21.22 namely as a philosophical concept of the one, greatest God, who can be addressed as “Zeus”. In other words: In the edict regarding the liberation of the prisoners of war and in

²⁵ Cf. εὐσέβ- and χαριστικός in 2 Macc 12:45.

the letter to the high priest, the king characterizes himself as a good king, who moulds himself on the ideals of good governance.

In his answering letter the high priest Eleazar expresses his gratitude and gives the names of the men he has chosen for the translation (Arist 41–50). The word “God” can be found twice in this section of the text: In the first instance, Eleazar elucidates that the king’s letter was publicly read out “we read it publicly to them in order that they might know what piety you have toward our god” (πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἡμῶν εὐσέβειαν; Arist 42). To which aspect of the letter εὐσέβεια refers here is debatable we read it publicly to them in order that they might know what piety you have toward our god – either to the liberation of the prisoners of war, like in the letter of the king (Arist 37), which is nowhere mentioned in the answer of the high priest, or to the gifts, which were brought along and are mentioned in the following abstract (Arist 42). This “piety” (εὐσέβεια), which the king sees proven regarding “the supreme God” (Arist 37), is interpreted by the high priest as piety “towards *our* God” (πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἡμῶν; Arist 42). Thereby the high priest gives an *‘interpretatio iudaica’* of the (philosophical-Hellenistic) concept of God within its (exclusive) monotheistic concept of God: From his point of view “piety” towards God can only be piety towards the one and only God of Israel.²⁶

In his answer to the king, Eleazar’s second reference to “God” can be found when he mentions that he sacrificed for the Ptolemaic royal family and that the people prayed “that things should always happen for you just as you desire and that God, who is ruler of all things (ὁ κυριεύων ἀπάντων θεός), should preserve the kingdom for you in peace with glory ...” (Arist 45). Thereby, the high priest locates the deeds of the king in the same context as the king himself located them: in his efforts regarding good governance, which is philanthropic and godly. The high priest denominates the all-governing God (ὁ κυριεύων ἀπάντων θεός) as guarantor, facilitator and ruler. This phrase, which is not used elsewhere in the LXX, has a subtle, carefully chosen and far-reaching openness: For Jewish ears, the phrase can only refer to the one and only God of Israel, but the Ptolemaic king can correlate this phrase with his philosophical, probably Stoic concept of God.

2.2. “God” in the interpretation of the high priest Eleazar (Arist 128–141)

In the course of the text, the narrator Aristeas reports about the conversations between the high priest and the delegation (Arist 130–166.167–169). An elaborate speech of the high priest is cited as an answer (ὁμιλία) to the questions of the Egyptian delegation about the legislation regarding the

²⁶ Different to WRIGHT, BENJAMIN G., *The Letter of Aristeas* (CEJL), 175.

dishes, beverages, and impure animals. The high priest does not answer these questions directly, but begins his speech with a hermeneutical prefix that also explores the theological foundation (Arist 131; 132–141). This prefix contains the most frequent mention of “God” in the Book of Aristeas (Arist 131.132.133.[134].136.139*bis*.140*bis*.141).

According to Eleazar, the Jewish concept of God stands behind all laws: “For first of all he demonstrated that God is the only one (ὅτι μόνος ὁ θεός ἐστι) and that his power is made manifest in everything (καὶ διὰ πάντων ἡ δύναμις αὐτοῦ φανερὰ γίνεται), every secretly on the earth escapes his notice, but whatever anyone does becomes manifest to him, as are those things yet to occur” (Arist 132). This explicit monotheistic credo is repeated when the high priest refers to the “only and powerful God” (τὸν μόνον θεὸν καὶ δυνατὸν σεβόμενοι, Arist 139). He expressive an exclusive monotheism by use of the *μόνος*-formula, as it is known in content from Isaiah II (Isa 43:11; 44:6; 45:1–6.21–22; 46:9 etc.). The *μόνος*-formula is also used in translated books of the LXX (Deut 32:12; 1 Sam 7:3.4; 2 Ki 19:15.19 // Isa 37:16.20; Ps 50:6^{LXX}; Isa 44:24 etc.) and in contemporary Greek books (3 Esr 8:25; Esth C 14 [= Esth 4:17]^{LXX}; 2 Macc 7:37 etc.). In Arist 134–138, this exclusive-monotheistic position is developed in a completely ‘traditional’ biblical manner: in a criticism of polytheism and in a criticism of the worship of images and idols.

This polemic against cultic idols and images corresponds with the tradition of the biblical writings, especially Isa II, but also with the early Jewish literature (Isa 44:9–20; see also Jer 10:3–16; Ps 115:4–8; 135:15–18; Bar 6; Dan 14; Wisd 13–14 etc.). Therewith, the statement of the high priest is anchored in his Jewish tradition with its exclusive-monotheistic concept of God.

Hence, one cannot say that an exclusive concept is adopted only in this passage, while the Book of Aristeas as a whole represents an inclusive concept of God.²⁷ Rather, the characters provide the frame for the perspective of the statement: Aristeas represents a philosophical concept of God, probably inspired by Stoic thoughts, in which behind all other outward forms the one, greatest God is presumed, who can be referred to as “Zeus”. The high priest Eleazar, of course, represents the Jewish, exclusive-monotheistic concept of God. This results in a fundamental difference in thinking between the characters ‘Aristeas’ and ‘Eleazar’.

In spite of their differences both concepts of God share the aspects of omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence (Arist 132 and Arist 133). Likewise, both see the function of the greatest deity in its activity as creator (Arist 16; 139: “the only and powerful God above all of the entire crea-

²⁷ Cf. STAUDI, *Der eine und einzige Gott*, 154. This position is – in this or a similar form – frequently represented.

tion” see Arist 201). The high priest Eleazar represents a concept of God, which is in accordance with the traditional Jewish theology. It beliefs in the one and only God and proclaims an exclusive monotheism in the tradition of Isa II with according polemic against idols and images.

3. The questions of the Ptolemaic king and the answers of his guests from Jerusalem (Arist 184–294)

The next part of the book referring to God is the seven-day-symposium, which the king holds in Alexandria to honour his guest (Arist 184–294; protocol of the symposium Arist 295–300): The guest are lying at the table (Arist 183–184; 187; 203), the dishes are intermitted by music (Arist 286). A symposium commences with prayers and sacrifices. At this point, this symposium is different: Dorotheos, who is responsible for the guests, forbids all sacrifices and asks Elissaios, the oldest priest from Jerusalem, to say the prayers (Arist 184). Elissaios prays: “May the Almighty God, O King, fill you with all the good things that he has created, and may he grant that you, your wife and children and those who are like-minded possess all these things unflinchingly for your entire life” (Arist 185). Elissaios refers to God as the initiator of creation, who shall bestow the king with gifts of His grace. The function of the creator and initiator of everything is ascribed to God in the (Stoic-)philosophical as well as in the Jewish tradition (for the Greek perspective see Arist 16, for the Jewish Arist 139 and 209). With the salutation “the Almighty God” (ὁ παντοκράτωρ θεός) Elissaios uses a wording, which is only used here in the Book of Aristeas, but widely used in early Jewish literature (including the LXX), but which is not used (as a title) in the Hebrew Bible: The LXX transfers the Hebrew phrase תִּיבְרָכְךָ יְיָ with παντοκράτωρ; this emphasises – in contrast to the Hebrew phrase – the omnipotence of God. The thought that the greatest God is able of everything, is a shared belief of the Jewish and Greek-philosophical position. Therewith, the prayer of Elissaios is subtly attuned to the situation: On the one hand, it contains a tribute to the Ptolemaic king and his family. On the other hand, it is theologically phrased in a way that clearly shows its connection to the Jewish tradition while at the same time stressing those aspects which are agreeable to a Hellenistic-theological manner of speaking as the above reconstruction of Aristeas’ background has shown since it is such a theologically honest, and at the same time skilful and diplomatic prayer, it prompts “with shouting and joyous cheer” (Arist 186).

This Jewish prayer opens the symposium. The description of the symposium is not an unimportant part of the report after all, it takes up more than

a third of the text. Most of the table talks are constructed after a uniform scheme: Within the seven-day-symposium the king first asks every guest a question, and receives an answer in return; then the king praises the answer and turns with another question to the next guest.

It is not the translation of the Jewish law that is a main topic of the symposium, but – like it is customary in the *peri basileus*-literature – it is kingship, good governance and responsible use of power; central *topoi* of the *peri basileus*-literature are the king's righteousness (*δικαιοσύνη*), beneficence (*εὐεργεσία*) and philanthropy (*φιλανθρωπία*).²⁸ The king has already shown these virtues in liberating the prisoners of war (Arist 24 cf. the salutation in Arist 46: "righteous king") and in his attitude of beneficence (Arist 36.44).

In the course of the symposium the 72 scholars recommend the king justice and righteousness, beneficence and philanthropy, which they not only understand as (human) virtues, but (also) ascribe to God (*δικαιοσύνη*: Arist 189.193.209.212.215.231.232.267.278.280–279.292–292; *εὐεργεσία*: Arist 190.205.210.249.273–274.281.290), *φιλανθρωπία* (Arist 208.265.290). Notably, the king never asks about God, but in all 72 answers "God" is the central aspect. In other words: From the perspective of the Jewish scholars the king's questions about good governance can only be answered in recourse to "God" and the scholars recommend him an *imitatio dei*, more precisely an *imitatio dei* of the God of *Israel*. This *imitatio dei* (explicitly in Arist 281) can be understood as subtle irony, a consistent part of the symposium,²⁹ but also as an implicit criticism: Regardless of the rhetorical technique of *captatio benevolentiae*, the mighty Ptolemaic king of Egypt receives in different forms the recommendation for an *imitatio* of the one and only God of *Israel* in all 72 answers. This is a fact which astonishes the audience at the end of the first day (Arist 200).

As an answer regarding the question of good governance the 72 answers unfold a panorama of Jewish theology: God shows everlasting clemency (*μακροθυμία* Arist 188); God is aware of every single thought (Arist 189); God presents himself to humans as a benefactor (*ὡς ὁ θεὸς εὐεργετῆί τὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένος* Arist 190), as clement (*ἐπιεικεία χρωμένου τοῦ θεοῦ* Arist 192.207.211), just/righteous (*δικαίως* Arist 193.209) and merciful (Arist

²⁸ HAAKE, MATTIAS, Warum und zu welchem Ende schreibt man *peri basileias*? Überlegungen zu einem Kontext einer literarischen Gattung im Hellenismus, in: Karen Piepenbrink (Hg.), Philosophie und Lebenswelt in der Antike, Darmstadt 2003, 83–138, 90.

²⁹ "Aristeas' delivers his narrative in a sober and serious tone. Yet a closer reading can detect an undertone of oblique mockery and even mild subversiveness", GRUEN, ERICH S., The Letter of Aristeas and the cultural context of the Septuagint, in: Karrer, Martin (Hg.), Die Septuaginta – Texte, Kontexte, Lebenswelten. Internationale Fachtagung veranstaltet von Septuaginta Deutsch (LXX.D), Wuppertal 20.–23. Juli 2006, Tübingen 2008, 134–156, 143.

208); he does not misuse his might (Arist 194), but he governs everything and directs everything in his might (Arist 195.196.216), God is the originator of all that is good (Arist 205) and he loves the truth (Arist 206); God is gracious and without wrath (Arist 253); God himself is philanthropic (Arist 257.265) and God directs all actions (Arist 287). Therefore, piety (εὐσέβεια) is the decisive attitude (Arist 215.229). Answering the explicit question of the king how to become “philanthropic” (Πῶς ἄν φιλόανθρωπος εἴη; Arist 208), the fourteenth scholar points out that he shall practice mercy, because God is merciful (καὶ γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ἐλεήμων ἐστίν Arist 208). The omnipresent and omniscient God is at the same time the giver of all gifts and the one who completes; everything can (and shall) be asked from him. All these aspects are ascribed to God in the biblical tradition (exemplarily united in Exod 34:6–7^{LXX}).

Within the description of the symposium, which takes up more than one third of the text, the Jewish scholars speak about God in a way which is deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition, about *their* God, the God of Israel. As can be seen, there are congruencies of forms and norms of conduct between the Jewish and the Greek-philosophical perspective: Both, Aristeas (Arist 18) and the Jewish scholars (Arist 193.280), assume that justice and righteousness comes from God. But congruencies in the ethic substantiation do not mean that the concepts of God correspond: Despite all openness the Jewish concept of God does not lead to an assimilation of the concepts of God. On the contrary: The Jewish scholars recommend *their* God to the Egyptian king, the one and only God of Israel, as the guarantor and rule of a good governance.

4. A conclusion

At first sight, the use of θεός, respectively ὁ θεός, leads to the impression that the book of Aristeas continuously speaks of the God of Israel. This impression becomes more differentiated by analyzing the narrators and the narrative construction of the texts. Therefore, it is of particular importance to consider the communicative situation in order to realize that there are two different concepts of God: On the one hand, there is the Greek-philosophical concept of God, which we find represented in Aristeas, the first-person-narrator of the report (of Aristeas), who presents himself as a Greek and high-ranking servant of the royal court, in king Ptolemaios II. and in the scholars at the court. On the other hand, there is the God of Israel, represented by the high priest and the Jewish scholars. At first sight, we find on both sides a form of ‘monotheism’. The high priest and the Jewish scholars have an exclusive-monotheistic concept of God, which in accord-

ance to the biblical tradition, is convinced that there is only the one and only God (cf. Arist 132). But although the king, Aristeas, and the scholars at the royal court speak of “God”, they have a different, a philosophical concept of God, which is probably inspired by Stoic thoughts: Behind all deities they presume a higher authority, which – in the framework of the theological wordplay – can be referred to as “God” but also as “Zeus” (Arist 16). Therefore, the Jewish side represents an explicit and theoretical monotheism, the Alexandrinic side a philosophical one-god-idea. Consequently, highly different concepts of God are connected to the one word “God” in the Book of Aristeas.

Due to the imbalance in power in the narrated situation, there is no direct argument between both sides. But there is something like an implicit debate in the Book of Aristeas, in which both positions are confronted: First, the Greco-philosophical idea of “God” is developed in the conversation between Aristeas and the king; against this idea, the high priest emphasises that in contrast to the many deities of the nations (Arist 134–138) the Jews worship the one and only God (Arist 132; 139–140 etc.). This not only disagrees with the thesis of identification of Aristeas (Arist 16), but eliminates an including or identifying strategy. In the symposium the 72 scholars prove that wisdom does not come from philosophical reflection but can only be thought of theologically and in regards to (their) God.

In the Book of Aristeas we find both concepts: a Stoic-inspired concept of God on the Greek side and an exclusive-monotheistic concept of God on the Jewish side.³⁰ In view of the readers it is possible that the philosophical position ascribed to Non-Jews is found by Jews as well. However, this position is not supported by the Jewish characters in the Book of Aristeas, but vetoed because of the monotheistic concept of God.

As a whole, the question regarding the concept of God in the Book of Aristeas shows quite clearly that one has to differentiate carefully to achieve what Aristeas in Arist 3 describes as his aim: the careful study of religious matters (*Τὴν προαίρεσιν ἔχοντες ἡμεῖς πρὸς τὸ περιέργως τὰ θεῖα κατανοεῖν* Arist 3).

³⁰ On this background it seems more reasonable to presume Jewish readers as the aimed audience for the Book of Aristeas. This would – although for different reasons – revive the thesis of TSCHERIKOVER, VICTOR, *The Ideology of the Letter of Aristeas*, HThR 51 (1958) 59–85.