When we get to the New Testament, even though both groups have experienced a significant impact, there nonetheless seem to be some distinctions that are made between Jews from within the land and Jews from outside the land. The particular incident we are pointing to is in Acts 6:1-6, where there is discrimination against widowed Hellenistic Jewish believers in Jesus as the Messiah, by their fellow believers who were Palestinian Jews. The question is, Why the discrimination? What would be the distinction between the two if they both to some degree had experienced the impact of Hellenism?

I think we can make two points here. One is that the Palestinian Jews, because of their interface with Hellenism and attempts made to force-feed Greek culture upon them, had a heightened, and perhaps even extreme, sensitivity to any threats, whether real or apparent, to any undercutting the authority of the Law—the Torah—or the authority of the Temple. Because some Jews spoke Greek as their first language and not Aramaic or Hebrew, perhaps the Palestinian Jews—because of their extreme sensitivity—might have interpreted this as a threat or compromise of some kind.

Moreover, the Palestinian Jews, who spoke Aramaic and Hebrew—the Hebraists—apparently had lost the ability to transcend creatively their own national and political desires. Therefore they could no longer critique their own perspectives and their own values within their culture; they were trapped in their own cultural circle. In this sense they would not have had eyes to see like the Hellenistic Jews, who were from a broader cultural experience and therefore would have had the ability more creatively and perhaps more pointedly to critique the Jewish culture of Palestine. Steven, in Acts 7, may be an example of a Hellenistic Jew who has the courage to critique the Sanhedrin about their very nationalistic and ethnocentric perspective, in terms of their view of God’s reigning and ruling primarily in the land of Palestine.

The Development of Key Jewish Institutions in the Face of Hellenism

The Family

The family is, of course, the very center of Jewish culture. Jewish family life is the strength of this culture and always has been. It was in Palestine in particular that we see, from ancient sources, glimpses of Jewish family life. The average family lived in a small single room in a windowless house. They would only have one storeroom that could be locked, and the entire family normally would sleep in one bed. (We find reference to this in Luke 11:7.)

In terms of family structure, the father was clearly head of the family. He was responsible for his family’s honor and well-being, and in particular for his sons’ instruction in the Law.

In Jewish culture, women were generally regarded as inferior to men. They could not appear as witnesses before the court in public, or take an active role in Temple worship. In fact, they could not go as far as men into the Temple, being restricted to the Court of Women. Normally they could only listen in the synagogue. Some of the rabbis tell us that they had only to keep the Law’s prohibitions and not all of the commandments. And to a large degree, they were restricted from studying the Torah. We see that with the coming of Christianity many of these things are changed. Christianity brought about a sweeping cultural revolution in the role of women.

The role of children was such that they had to respect both their father and their mother. Marriage was generally assumed, and from Genesis 1:28 the command to be fruitful and multiply was taken as the norm. Marriage contracts were made by the father and the older men in the family, normally in a child’s youth, and, at least in Palestine, men were married between the ages of 18 and 24, and women between the very young ages of 12 and 14.

So the Jewish family, a very close-knit group, was the backbone of Jewish culture.

Jewish Education

Jewish education took part in four different phases, but many folk just went through the first phase, which took place in the home. Both the Old and the New Testaments emphasize that the education in the home was ultimately under the father’s responsibility, that he was to “train up the children in the way that they should go.” Apparently, though, much of this was delegated to the mother or other women in the family. But the father was ultimately responsible, and if children were uneducated or unruly, it was a particular disgrace to the father. Almost all children, then, had some basic instruction at home, especially learning passages of Scripture, and taught by their fathers.