

The Three Scales of Jewish Engagement with Hellenism - according to John Barclay

Based on notes from Introducing the Apocrypha - deSilva.

John Barclay's scales clarify the complex relationship between Jewish identity and foreign culture. This helps explain [Hellenisation](#).

1. Assimilation scale

The extent to which a Jewish person has *integrated* socially into the life of the dominant culture. At the lower end of the scale, we find Jews whose fellowship was almost exclusively with fellow Jews.

"We like living in the ghetto and have no desire to mix with non-Jews." (Ghettos did not exist then, but the concept works)

At the top end of the scale, we find Jews who are hard to identify as Jews any longer. Indeed, they have deliberately taken steps to distance themselves from the Jewish community, even to the extent of reversing circumcision and joining pagan cults. There were likely very few of those, but they did exist.

"We do not want to be seen anywhere near the ghetto."

2. Acculturation scale

The extent to which a Jewish person has *internalised* the dominant culture (Hellenistic-Roman). How much Greek or Latin have they learned? How much of the Greek or Roman values and traditions have they absorbed? At the lower end of the scale, we find those who are unable to understand or speak Greek.

"Why speak Greek when Hebrew is an older, nobler language?"

At the top end, we find those who have mastered the Greek language and education. They are familiar with Greek literature, philosophy, rhetoric and ethics. Examples would be [Philo](#) and [Josephus](#).

"We understand your world, because we've studied your texts and culture even more closely than you have."

3. Accommodation scale

The extent to which Jews *use* whatever ability they have in the Greek language and learning. How has the dominant culture caused them to interpret or reinterpret their tradition, and the way in which they engage with that culture? In the centre of that scale are Jews who used their understanding to maintain their Jewish identity as unique and distinctive, while reinterpreting tradition to make it acceptable to the dominant culture.

"We're different, but we understand you and respect your ways. You have nothing to fear from us. Our way is just another form of your way; Jewish tradition fits neatly within your world."

To one side of that, we find the distinctiveness of Judaism submerged and Jewish people attempting to portray Jewish traditions as essentially the same as the dominant culture.

*"We're all the same, just with different expressions. We are no threat to you. As loyal Jews, we honour our distinct tradition, **and** are good participants in your culture."*

To the other side, we find Jews utilising the values and thinking of the dominant culture to "assert the supreme value of the Jewish way of life and denigrate the Gentile way of life."

"We're very different from you, and there is a good reason. Using your own cultural tools, we show that our way is better—and you should consider adopting it."

The value of this scale is that it helps us see where an apocryphal author wants to move readers from their current position to a new one — or where the author is simply affirming readers who already share his stance. We can also see that Hellenisation is not an alternative to being a Jew, or necessarily antagonistic to being Jewish. Instead, there are various ways Jews can be Hellenised to different degrees for different ends.

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