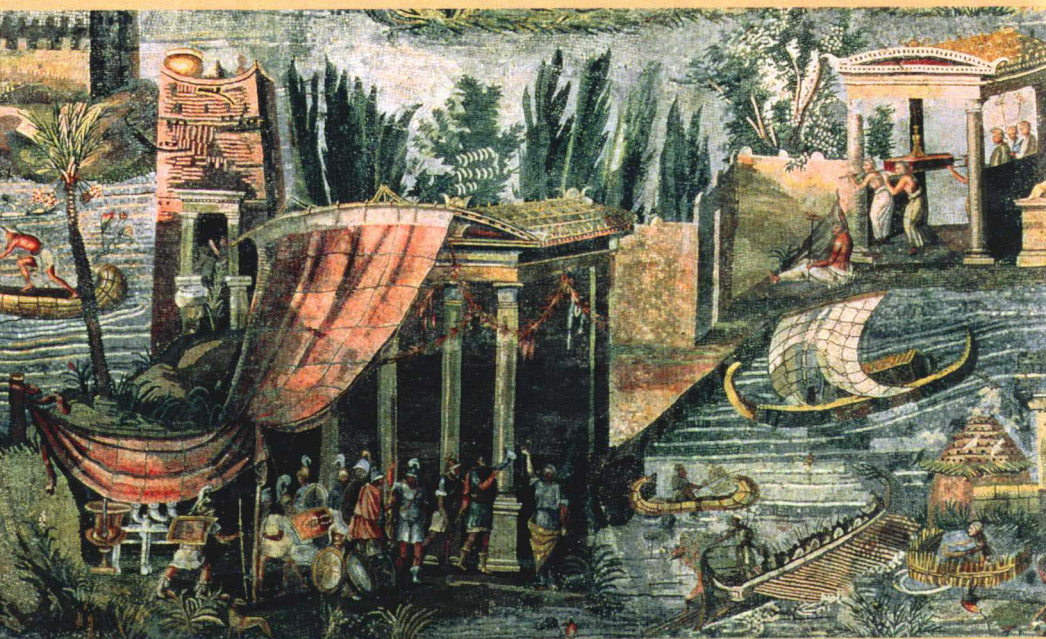


Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria



MAREN R. NIEHOFF

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JEWISH EXEGESIS AND HOMERIC SCHOLARSHIP IN ALEXANDRIA

Systematically reading Jewish exegesis in light of Homeric scholarship, this book argues that more than two thousand years ago Alexandrian Jews developed critical and literary methods of Bible interpretation which are still extremely relevant today. Maren Niehoff provides a detailed analysis of Alexandrian Bible interpretation, from the second century BCE through newly discovered fragments to the exegetical work done by Philo. Niehoff shows that Alexandrian Jews responded in a great variety of ways to the Homeric scholarship developed at the Museum. Some Jewish scholars used the methods of their Greek colleagues to investigate whether their Scripture contained myths shared by other nations, while others insisted that significant differences existed between Judaism and other cultures. This book is vital for any student of ancient Judaism, early Christianity and Hellenistic culture.

MAREN R. NIEHOFF is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Jewish Thought at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She is the author of *The Figure of Joseph in Post-Biblical Literature* (1992) and *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture* (2001).

For Udi, Maya, Ayana and Stav

*In memory of
Leora Elias-Bar Levav and Rena Moses-Hrushovski*

*Moi, un peu mort parmi les vivants, toi, un peu vivante parmi
les morts.*

(Albert Cohen, Le livre de ma mère)

Acknowledgements

This book had its beginning in a reading group on the *Iliad* at the house of my friend and colleague Yehuda Liebes. When coming across a reference in the Oxford edition to Aristarchus' text criticism, I immediately asked whether Philo, known for his quotations from Homer, was aware of his fellow Alexandrian's work. It was this initial question which prompted my broader investigation into the connections between Jewish Bible exegesis and Homeric scholarship. The reading group contributed in another crucial way: I profited immensely from Yehuda's vast knowledge of Homer's epic and could not have endeavoured to study the scholia without his help in the initial stages. Later on Yehuda also read a draft of the book, offering constructive comments and encouraging me even more than usual.

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A significant source of inspiration was the interdisciplinary reading group in the field of Hellenistic Judaism at the Hebrew University. We started in the autumn of 2006, reading the fragments of Ezekiel's tragedy, and developed into a lively discussion group during 2007–9, when we read the *Letter of Aristeas* and related sympotic literature. The group provided a unique forum for exchanging views with colleagues from different fields and considerably broadened my perspectives. I also profited from the group's discussion of my chapter on the *Letter of Aristeas*.

The research for this book was generously supported by the ISRAEL SCIENCE FOUNDATION (grant nos. 810/03 and 435/08). I benefited from the encouragement and thoughtful advice of the anonymous reviewers. The two research grants moreover enabled me to hire outstanding assistants: Sergey Minov, who helped from the beginning to the end with unfailing energy, as well as Yakir Paz and Sharon Weisser. The competence, commitment and academic independence of each of them have significantly contributed to the book. Sergey also compiled the bibliography, while Yakir prepared the index. The grants furthermore enabled me to systematically order books from other Israeli libraries as well as from abroad. I wish to thank especially Zemira Reubeni of the National Library for her never fading energy in tracking down books, thus emulating the

ideal of the ancient library in Alexandria, without, however, resorting to its more notorious methods. Over the years the ISRAEL SCIENCE FOUNDATION has shown exemplary flexibility in meeting the ever changing needs of scholars, thus contributing to research in a comprehensive manner.

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Chapter 5 is based on a lecture originally delivered in French at the Université Libre de Bruxelles and to appear as 'Recherche homérique et exégèse biblique à Alexandrie. Le cas de la Tour de Babel', in S. Inowlocki-Meister and B. Decharneux (eds.), *Philon d'Alexandrie: un penseur à l'intersection des cultures gréco-romaine, orientale, juive, et chrétienne, Actes du colloque de Bruxelles, 26–28 juin 2007*, which was to be published in 2010. I wish to thank Sabrina Inowlocki-Meister for her permission to use the material in this book.

I am delighted to dedicate this book to my immediate family, my husband Udi and our three daughters. Udi was always the first to hear about new questions and answers, taking a keen interest in the development of the book and offering useful comments on the introduction. My family has provided me with a firm anchor in the pleasures of life without which I would have led a rather limited ivory-tower existence.

This book is also dedicated to the memory of two special women. During the preparation of the book, within less than a year, both of them died of cancer, Leora just after Passover 2006, Rena just before Purim 2007. Accompanying them and mourning their loss has sometimes made research impossible, while at other times it was precisely my work which set me back on the track of life.

Last, but not least: during my work on this book I have become increasingly appreciative of the ancient scholars, both Jewish and Greek. Since the peak of Alexandrian scholarship there seems to be 'nothing new under the sun', both academic methods and human mistakes having been repeated ever since. I can thus only hope that this book would have been pleasing to its heroes.

MAREN R. NIEHOFF, JERUSALEM

Abbreviations

PHILO'S WORKS

Allegorical Commentary

<i>Agr.</i>	<i>De agricultura</i>
<i>All.</i> 1, 2, 3	<i>Legum allegoriae</i> I, II, III
<i>Cher.</i>	<i>De cherubim</i>
<i>Conf.</i>	<i>De confusione linguarum</i>
<i>Congr.</i>	<i>De congressueru ditionis gratia</i>
<i>Cont.</i>	<i>De vita contemplativa</i>
<i>Det.</i>	<i>Quod deterius potiori insidari soleat</i>
<i>Deus</i>	<i>Quod Deus sit immutabilis</i>
<i>Ebr.</i>	<i>De ebrietate</i>
<i>Fuga</i>	<i>De fuga et inventione</i>
<i>Gig.</i>	<i>De gigantibus</i>
<i>Her.</i>	<i>Quis rerum divinarum heres sit</i>
<i>Migr.</i>	<i>De migratione Abrahami</i>
<i>Mut.</i>	<i>De mutatione nominum</i>
<i>Plant.</i>	<i>De plantatione</i>
<i>Post.</i>	<i>De posteritate Caini</i>
<i>Sacr.</i>	<i>De sacrificiis Abelis et Caini</i>
<i>Sobr.</i>	<i>De sobrietate</i>
<i>Somn.</i> 1, 2	<i>De somniis</i> I, II

Questions and Answers on Genesis and Exodus (Q&A)

<i>Q.E.</i> 1, 2	<i>Quaestiones et solutiones in Exodum</i> I, II
<i>Q.G.</i> 1, 2, 3, 4	<i>Quaestiones et solutiones in Genesin</i> I, II, III, IV

Exposition of the Law (Exposition)

<i>Abr.</i>	<i>De Abrahamo</i>
<i>Dec.</i>	<i>De decalogo</i>
<i>Jos.</i>	<i>De Iosepho</i>

<i>Mos.</i> 1, 2	<i>De vita Mosis</i> I, II
<i>Opif.</i>	<i>De opificio mundi</i>
<i>Praem.</i>	<i>De praemiis et poenis</i>
<i>Spec.</i> 1, 2, 3, 4	<i>De specialibus legibus</i> I, II, III, IV
<i>Virt.</i>	<i>De virtutibus</i>

Historical writings

<i>Flacc.</i>	<i>In Flaccum</i>
<i>Legat.</i>	<i>Legatio ad Gaium</i>

Philosophical writings

<i>Aet.</i>	<i>De aeternitate mundi</i>
<i>Alex.</i>	<i>Alexander</i> (= <i>De animalibus</i>)
<i>Prob.</i>	<i>Quod omnis probus liber sit</i>

OTHER WORKS

Titles of other ancient works are abbreviated according to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd revised edition, 2003, with the following exceptions:

<i>FGH</i>	<i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> , ed. F. Jacoby. 7 vols. Berlin, 1923–30
<i>SCI</i>	<i>Scripta Classica Israelica</i>

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CHAPTER I

Setting the stage

From the inception of modern research Jewish Bible exegesis in Alexandria has often been regarded as a marginal phenomenon or a puzzling hybrid. It tended to be studied either from the perspective of biblical interpretation in the Land of Israel or as a forerunner of Christian exegesis. Scholars familiar with the Jewish tradition usually focused on the emergence of rabbinic literature, which subsequently became normative. If Alexandrian exegesis was at all taken into account, it was characteristically either construed as a derivative phenomenon depending on its counterpart in Jerusalem or dismissed as an alien body of literature, which reflects Greek ideas and anticipates Christianity while failing to resonate in traditional Jewish circles.¹ On the other hand, scholars familiar with the Christian tradition tended to approach Jewish Bible exegesis in Alexandria in the context of either the New Testament or patristic literature, giving special emphasis to allegory. In this scenario Philo figured rather prominently, often being praised as *the* representative of Hellenistic Judaism who prepared the way for Clement, Origen and others.²

Luckily, a number of scholars have appreciated Alexandrian Judaism in its own right. During the transition period from the Enlightenment to *Wissenschaft* it was praised by Isaac Marcus Jost as a strikingly modern form of Judaism. He stressed that it was based on a division of state and church as well as on a cultural synthesis of Jewish and Greek traditions.³ Alexandrian Judaism emerged as an important paradigm for combining tradition with critical awareness. It was identified as a forerunner of the Golden Age of Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages and liberal Judaism in contemporary Germany. Following this early impulse, additional scholars have begun to study Alexandrian Bible exegesis in its proper cultural and

¹ See esp. Frankel 1854; Ritter 1879; Wolfson 1947; Cohen 1995. On the history of scholarship, see Freudenthal 1869; Cohn 1892; Niehoff 1999; in press, a; J. J. Collins 2010.

² See esp. Gfrörer 1831, vol. 1; Dähne 1834; Deines and Niebuhr 2004.

³ Jost 1821, esp. pp. 265–99; 1857–9, vol. 1, pp. 1–2, 344–93; see also Meyer 1991; Schorsch 1977.

historical context. Such pioneering studies tended to focus on the Ptolemaic period, while Philo's exegetical writings, as opposed to his historical works, have generally been examined with little awareness of their immediate context in the Roman period.⁴

It is thus time for a comprehensive study of Jewish Bible exegesis in its immediate Alexandrian context. The most relevant aspect of Alexandria, which has thus far been surprisingly overlooked, is the fact that the city was the leading centre of Homeric scholarship in the Hellenistic world. Developing Aristotelian models, it boasted of the largest library at the time as well as the famous Museum, which has rightly been identified as a type of university.⁵ In contrast to that of Pergamum, Alexandrian scholarship focused on the literal text, identifying the authentic version of the Homeric epics and analysing their literary features. This detailed attention to the Homeric text led to a standardization of the corpus and a division into recognized books.⁶ Glenn Most has pointed to the importance of this Alexandrian contribution to the canonization of Homer's epics.⁷

A learned Jewish scholar such as Philo would naturally be familiar with the Alexandrian division of the Homeric epics; he refers once to a passage 'in the *Iliad* at the beginning of the thirteenth song' (*Cont.* 17). He assumed that Greeks and barbarians were raised on the poets, initially acquiring basic reading skills and then launching into a 'detailed investigation'.⁸

⁴ Freudenthal 1874 had a seminal influence on modern research, calling for a change of paradigm. Freudenthal offered a detailed analysis of some early Jewish works written in Greek and showed that they anticipate rabbinic literature, sometimes even influencing it. Equally important, yet less accessible to a wider audience is Gutman's work in Hebrew (1958–63), which offers an in-depth study of the early Alexandrian exegetes. Gutman regularly interpreted Alexandrian Jews in terms of their Hellenistic environment, arguing that they engaged with the surrounding Greek literature to treat biblical motifs. Fraser 1972, in his magisterial study of Ptolemaic Alexandria, analysed Jewish sources in terms of the city's contemporary discourse, thus giving a significant boost to the field of Alexandrian Judaism. Gruen 2002 made an important contribution by analysing the historical situation of Alexandrian Jews and their proud self-image especially during the Ptolemaic period.

⁵ For details on the Library and the Museum, see Fraser 1972, vol. 1, pp. 312–35, 447–79, who emphasized the importance of the patronage system as well as Aristotelian influence; contra Pfeiffer 1968, pp. 87–104, who stressed the role of Alexandrian scholar-poets, such as Philotas, who initiated in his view a rupture from the Classical Age. Fraser's conclusions have been confirmed by Pöhlmann 1994, pp. 26–40; Canfora 2002; N. L. Collins 2000; Rajak 2009, pp. 74–8; and, less emphatically, by Clauss 2003, pp. 92–8.

⁶ Regarding the division of the Homeric epics into twenty-four songs, which is standardized by the Alexandrian scholars but not reflected in the early papyri, see Nünlist 2006; S. West 1967, pp. 18–25; contra Jensen 1999.

⁷ Most 1990, pp. 54–8; on the *numerus verbum* see also Marrou 1950, pp. 228–9; M. L. West 2001, pp. 50–2, 61–7; 1998, p. 99; M. Finkelberg 2004, 2006, who showed that Alexandrian readings, as distinct from the number of verses, were not influential in the transmission of the Homeric texts.

⁸ *Agr.* 18, *Mut.* 179; Philo also refers to his own 'reading and study of the writings of the poets' as part of his training in grammar (*Congr.* 74).

'The Poet' provided him not only with many winged expressions, but also with an authoritative proof-text for Jewish monotheism.⁹ Other anonymous exegetes in Alexandria explicitly compared the biblical story of the Tower of Babel to a similar enterprise of the sons of Aloeidae recorded in the *Odyssey* (*Conf.* 4–5). Such references are not at all surprising given the known acculturation of Alexandrian Jews. They not only spoke and wrote in Greek but quickly read even their Scriptures only in the Greek translation.¹⁰ Homer's epics, which constituted the most important pillar of Greek education in Hellenistic Egypt, were obviously familiar to them.¹¹

The present book is based on the recognition that Homer's epics as well as Moses' Torah were foundational texts, irrespective of whether their canonicity was precisely the same, and as such prompted a large corpus of minute interpretations in their respective communities of readers. The hermeneutics involved in both contexts emerged in a similar historical environment and followed surprisingly similar rules. Moreover, readers of the Homeric epics and the Bible faced texts with distinct literary features, while at the same time relating to them as the basis of their religion. Given these premises, it is time for a systematic investigation into the historical connections between the ancient students of Homer's epics and Moses' Bible.

It is the purpose of this book to examine the connections between Homeric scholarship and Jewish Bible exegesis in Alexandria. Literal interpretation, both in its own right and as a basis of different forms of allegorical exegesis, will be the focus of our attention. I shall argue that Jewish exegetes were generally familiar with the academic methods developed at the Museum. Many of these methods directly applied them to the Jewish Scriptures. Alexandrian Bible scholars thus created a new synthesis and

⁹ *Abr.* 10, *Conf.* 170; for examples of Homeric expressions in Philo see, e.g., *Fuga* 31, *Somn.* 2:53, 2:275; Berthelot 2010; Niehoff in press, b; in press, d.

¹⁰ Even Philo, who refers to Hebrew etymologies, had no access to the Hebrew Bible but instead relied on etymological lists, as has been shown by Amir 1988, pp. 440–4; Grabbe 1988 (including an English translation of Y. Amir's 1984 Hebrew article); Kahn 1965, pp. 337–45; Kamesar 2009, pp. 65–73; contra Rajak 2009, pp. 149–50, who proposes to revive the position of Wolfson 1947, vol. 1, pp. 87–90. Note other signs too of Philo's acculturation: he not only attended the theatre and was familiar with the different sports practised in the gymnasium (Harris 1976, pp. 51–101) but is also the first extant writer to call Plato 'most holy' (Niehoff 2007). He explained many of his views by reference to Plato, Aristotle, his student Theophrastus and the Stoics, obviously taking a keen interest in the contemporary philosophical discourse (Bréhier 1908; Runia 1986, 1981; Lévy 1998, 2009; Alesse 2008; Niehoff 2010b. On Philo's views on Greeks and Greek culture, see Birnbaum 2001; Niehoff 2001, pp. 137–58. For further details on the exclusively Greek context of Alexandrian Bible exegesis, see especially Chapter 7.

¹¹ On the centrality of Homer in the educational programme of Hellenistic Egypt see Cribiore 2001.

offered ground-breaking analyses of their canonical text. Their achievements were outstanding and anticipated both modern text criticism as well as subsequent developments in later antiquity. Whereas the overall picture is one of significant creativity in dialogue with the intellectual discourse of the environment, it is conspicuous that there were lively controversies among Alexandrian Jews about the nature and legitimacy of academic scholarship.

THE DIVERSITY OF ALEXANDRIAN JUDAISM

Special attention will be paid in this book to the diversity of views among Alexandrian Jews. In Alexandria, where Josephus' famous distinction of three Jewish 'sects' does not apply and no papyri of the significance of the Qumran Scrolls have yet been discovered, we have to rely on the extant literary evidence for a reconstruction of the different approaches.¹² Already the earliest Jewish sources from Ptolemaic Egypt suggest significant diversity. While Ezekiel the Tragedian, for example, used Euripides' model to stage his own drama of the Exodus, Aristaeas denounced the use of biblical materials on the stage.¹³ Artapanus employed motifs of the Graeco-Egyptian Alexander legends to depict Moses as a military leader, whereas Aristobulus was convinced that Moses had established a distinct Jewish philosophy, which was comparable to the views of the Peripatetics, Homer and Hesiod as well as Orpheus.¹⁴

The *Letter of Aristaeas*, Demetrius and Aristobulus provide our main evidence of Jewish Bible exegesis in Ptolemaic Alexandria. I shall argue that they were written in the mid second century BCE and belonged to the period when Alexandrian scholarship was at its height under the leadership of Aristarchus.¹⁵ The *Letter of Aristaeas* will first be investigated, because it offers a meaningful and unique account of the Alexandrian Library in relation to the Jewish Scriptures. In contrast to current views, I shall argue that Aristaeas was conservative. Rejecting the application of critical Homeric

¹² The Therapeutae, depicted by Philo as a 'party' (πρὸς ἑσέως, *Cont.* 67) with separate living quarters near Alexandria and a special style of life, will be discussed below in Chapter 9. The diversity of Alexandrian Judaism is also stressed by J. J. Collins 2000, pp. 14–16. On the sects in the Land of Israel, see esp. Baumgarten 1997, pp. 42–80; Goodman 2000; Newman 2006, esp. pp. 51–124.

¹³ On Ezekiel's and Aristaeas' attitudes towards the theatre, see Gutman 1958–63, vol. II, pp. 9–69; Jacobson 1983; Lanfranchi 2006; Barclay 1996, pp. 132–8.

¹⁴ On Artapanus see Gutman 1958–63, vol. II, pp. 109–36; Holladay 1983–96, vol. I, p. 235; Barclay 1996, pp. 127–32; on Aristobulus, see Gutman 1958–63, vol. II, pp. 186–220; Walter 1964, pp. 10–13, 103–15; Holladay 1983–96, vol. III, pp. 114–15, 204–6, 226–7; J. J. Collins 2000, pp. 186–90.

¹⁵ For discussions of the dates of these works, see below in the respective chapters, especially Chapter 3, where I explain why the generally assumed third-century date of Demetrius can no longer be maintained.