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978-1-107-00072-8 - 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).

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107000728

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First published 2011

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-00072-8 Hardback

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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)*

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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.

Special thanks are also due to Margalit Finkelberg, who accompanied my work on this book from its beginning. I recall our first meeting at *Mishkenot Sha'ananim*, when I told her about my preliminary impression that there may have been significant links between the Homeric scholia and Jewish Bible exegesis in Alexandria. Margalit responded with enthusiasm and has encouraged me ever since, providing materials from her private library and reading drafts of chapters. Her comments were detailed and wise, saving me from mistakes and alerting me to new avenues. Moreover, my Homeric colleagues abroad have been very kind and forthcoming. Filippo Pontani immediately responded to each draft of a chapter with a few pages of bibliography as well as detailed and extremely helpful comments, which saved me from mistakes and prompted me to tighten my arguments. He has also read the final version of several chapters, taking a keen interest in the book. René Nünlist generously shared his work before it was published and read drafts of chapters with unusual attention and curiosity. His comments as well as his provision of unavailable literature significantly contributed to the book. Francesca Schironi kindly shared unpublished work and answered specific questions.

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Acknowledgements

I also wish to thank my colleagues in the field of Philonic studies and Hellenistic culture. David Runia read a draft of the whole book, offering extremely useful comments, which shaped the final version. Ellen Birnbaum read two chapters with exceptional care. She left no word unexamined and offered good advice, helping me to formulate my arguments more clearly in view of an audience unfamiliar with Homeric scholarship. George R. Boys-Stones and Eric S. Gruen each read a draft of a chapter, providing lucid comments from their vast scholarly expertise.

Studying Philo's *Questions and Answers*, I acquired new teachers and colleagues in the field of Armenian studies. I wish to thank Sergio de la Porta, who offered an extra-curricular course at the Hebrew University, teaching a handful of students Classical Armenian. Subsequently, Sergio kindly studied with me Philo's *Questions and Answers* and guided me through the intricacies of the Armenian translation. Without him Chapter 9 could not have been written. I also wish to thank Abraham Terian, who visited the Hebrew University during the spring semester of 2006 and patiently helped me with my first readings of Philo's *Questions and Answers* in the Armenian translation.

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

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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.

It has been a special pleasure to work with the editorial team of Cambridge University Press. Michael Sharp promptly responded to my initial query by encouraging me to submit drafts of ready chapters. Laura Morris subsequently took an active role throughout the editorial process, accompanying my work with foresight and gentle humour. The two anonymous readers of the Press offered useful comments for the final version of the book, inviting me to think of the wider implications of my argument. Christina Sarigiannidou was a very efficient production editor; Jan Chapman was exceptionally conscientious and constructive in her work as copy-editor. The mosaic shown on the cover of the book was unknown to me before Roni Amir of the Bezalel School of Arts in Jerusalem kindly drew my attention to it.

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.

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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
<i>Questions and Answers on Genesis and Exodus (Q&A)</i>	
<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
<i>Exposition of the Law (Exposition)</i>	
<i>Abr.</i>	<i>De Abrahamo</i>
<i>Dec.</i>	<i>De decalogo</i>
<i>Jos.</i>	<i>De Iosepho</i>

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xiv	<i>List of abbreviations</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>