

BOOK REVIEW

Maren R. Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). vii + 222 pp. Hardcover £50.00 (\$78.95 USD).

Maren Niehoff is the senior lecturer in the Department of Jewish Thought at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She is the author of two other works: *The Figure of Joseph in Post-Biblical Literature* (1992) and *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture* (2001). This volume is an attempt to examine Jewish Bible exegesis in its immediate Alexandrian context. Alexandria was host to the largest library as well as the most famous museum during the first century BCE. It was also the leading centre of Homeric scholarship in the Hellenistic world, using the analysis of literary features as a methodology for identifying authentic versions of Homeric epic. Niehoff's thesis is that well-written Jewish scholars, such as Philo, would have been quite familiar with Homer. Since Homer was deemed a foundational text to the Greeks on the same level as the Torah for the Jews, exegetical methods surrounding Homer would have had an impact on how the Jews wrote and thought about their own theology. This becomes clear when one examines some of the texts produced at the time, such as the *Letter of Aristeas* and fragments of the works by the Jewish author Demetrius. In this way, Niehoff sides with the opinion of modern scholars such as Hay who have concluded that Philo's exegesis, as well as that of other Jewish writers at the time, was a 'dialogical enterprise' involving debate partners and opponents; this method is perhaps most clearly seen in the Aristotelian exegetical tradition that dominated Alexandria at the time. This method is clearly attested in the *Letter of Aristeas*, which sternly rejects the application of critical Homeric methods to Jewish Scriptures, as well as the Demetrius fragments that employ it.

This book is divided into ten chapters spanning three sections. The first section is titled 'Early Jewish Responses to Homeric Scholarship' and discusses the *Letter of Aristeas* and several works by the author

Demetrius. It also discusses the famous Homeric scholar Aristobulus and his methodological contributions. The second section is titled 'Critical Homeric Scholarship in the Fragments of Philo's Anonymous Colleagues' and takes into account the similarities and dissimilarities of Jewish mythology and its Hellenistic counterpart. It also discusses the historical perspectives on Jewish Scripture as well as traces of text criticism employed by Alexandrian Jews as methodology for reading Scripture. The third section is titled 'The Inversion of Homeric Scholarship by Philo' and discusses Philo's integration of popular exegetical methods used in Homeric scholarship on Jewish Scripture. These include allegorical commentaries and Aristotelean 'question and answer' methods used for instruction. This method includes the asking of a question concerning the text followed by an immediate answer. It also discusses Philo's *Exposition of the Law*, which seems to depart from his usual use of Hellenistic exegetical methods, and which may be seen as an attempt to 'supersede' Hellenistic thought.

Niehoff uses the example of the *Letter of Aristeas* and several works by Demetrius to make the case that Jewish authors in Alexandria were familiar with Homeric scholarship and forms of Hellenistic exegesis. The *Letter* may have been composed some time during the second century BCE at the height of Homeric scholarship in Alexandria. It contains the first known uses of the terms 'Holy Legislation' and 'Holy Law' with regards to the Torah, perhaps revealing the author's attempts to separate Jewish Law and Hellenistic writings. The *Letter* also describes the canonization of the LXX, which is important because of the author's use of the Greek word διόσκειν, best translated as 'interpolation'. This was a technical term in Alexandrian exegetical circles, often referring to something that had been added to a text by someone other than the author. To interpolate Holy Scripture was to incur a curse. The use of this term may also have lent itself to the authenticating of the LXX among the great works of literature of the time.

Demetrius's fragments are thought to be a bridge between biblical and Homeric scholarship. According to Niehoff, such fragments are the clues to discerning the writings of other Jewish exegetes at that time, hence the title 'anonymous colleagues'. What is more, these exegetes seem to be well acquainted with the aforementioned 'question and answer' method. What Demetrius brings to the discussion is an innovative mixture of this method and a paraphrastic interpretation of Scripture. Niehoff presents the paraphrastic method by examining the

contribution of Homeric scholar Aristarchus. He sought to bring overall harmony where there were gaps in Homer's narrative by giving more details in his explanatory paraphrase. This technique became known as *κατὰ τὸ σιωπώμενον* (translated 'according to the silence') because it assumed that the poet had left something unsaid. It seems the gaps provided the necessary tension for adaptation and paraphrasis.

From here, Niehoff writes several chapters outlining Philo's work in this area. She argues for Philo's adoption of the Aristotelean 'question and answer' method; he even developed a manual for its instruction. Philo also became the first biblical scholar to adopt certain technical terms of stylistic analysis that are associated in Alexandria especially with Aristarchus. Philo also seems to shift between viewing Scripture as a divinely inspired text and on other occasions citing Moses as the author of a literary work. Such a shift is explained by Yehoshua Amir as resulting from a Platonic notion of literary inspiration, according to which the human author is inspired by an external, divine 'impetus'. He also seems to adapt such Platonic methods by using problems of verisimilitude as springboards for allegorical interpretation in a spiritual, Platonic mode. Hence it is important to view Philo's works in an Alexandrian context as dialogical pieces, not separate literary entities.

I believe that Niehoff does an excellent job of representing the 'state-of-play' in Alexandria. For example, she discusses Aristarchus's contempt for additions to the Homeric text. His chief concern was that his predecessor Zenodotus disparaged rather than emended the text through his interpolations. It seems that Aristarchus saw the original Homeric text as finalized as it was originally written—lacunae and all. As a result, Aristarchus's main concern was to purge the text of such 'additions', which he thought were added by a writer with little understanding of Homeric genius. Contrarily, the *Letter* points to the authentic nature of the LXX as the translation of the Hebrew Bible. The major difference between the two camps, as Niehoff points out, is that Aristarchus presupposes the faulty nature of the Homeric text as he received it, while the *Letter* points to the authentic nature of the LXX. The only thing that seems to link them is their attitude towards altering the text; the consistent use of the term 'interpolation', which is argued by Niehoff to have been coined by Aristarchus, appears in regards to the Homeric text as well. However, is the use of this term enough evidence to suggest that Jewish authors were familiar with Homeric scholarship? Niehoff buttresses her argument by pointing out not only

the use of this term, but also the use of several other corresponding terms in the *Letter*: adding to the text (προτίθημι), transferring of motifs (μεταφέρω), and making a deletion (ποιῶ ἀφάρεσιν). These connections ‘reflect significant connections between Greek and Jewish scholars, rather than a general resentment of the Museum and Library by Jewish exegetes, as has sometimes been suggested’ (p. 26). And so, it seems that the *Letter* provides insights into a fascinating connection between two separate ‘worlds’ of exegesis in Alexandria. These insights were picked up by Philo and featured in his allegorical renderings of the Torah.

In terms of Philo’s contributions, Niehoff argues that Philo utilized the text-critical methods he saw in Homeric scholarship. Not only did he use them, Niehoff argues, but Philo innovated with such methods to create a ‘separate discourse of Jewish hermeneutics’ (p. 133). Wanting to defend the LXX as infallible, Philo set out to allegorize textual issues. Following in the footsteps of Aristarchus, who explored the ways in which Homer customarily spoke (εἶωθε λέγειν), Philo explains the stylistic habits of Moses (εἶωθε καλεῖν) (p. 137). Such a connection sheds light on the fact that Philo viewed Scripture as infallible, but may have done so in the tradition of Aristarchus who thought the same of Homer. Both exegetes treated any interpolation to their texts as false additions not in the authentic style of either Moses or Homer. This is a fascinating insight by Niehoff for two reasons: (1) if she is correct in her statement, Philo becomes the first Jewish exegete to study the Bible in this way, creating a tradition that (2) could have influenced the way Jews, including the New Testament writers, viewed the Torah. Could it be possible then to suggest that allegorizing texts became a way of literary style for the Jews? Such a conclusion opens up a vast amount of study in this area for New Testament scholarship in terms of Gospel composition.

The strength of this book lies in its clear writing as well as its novel assertions concerning Jewish exegetes in light of Homeric scholarship. Not only was I able to follow the arguments easily, I also gained access to an excellent bibliography for Homeric, Jewish and Philonic works. I recommend this book for anyone studying either Homeric or Jewish Second Temple literature.

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