

Nathalie LaCoste, *Waters of the Exodus: Jewish Experiences with Water in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 190; Leiden – Boston: Brill 2018). Pp. X+186. €104.00. ISBN 978-90-04-38431-6 (HB), 978-90-04-38430-9 (E-book)

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Nathalie LaCoste works at Queen's College, Memorial University of Newfoundland in St. John's, Canada. The book *Waters of the Exodus* is the publication of her PhD thesis from 2016 submitted to the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. The study is an analysis of the relation between the physical environment of Egypt as a "lived space" and the narratives of the exodus composed there. The book comprises an introduction, five chapters followed by a short conclusion, a bibliography and three indexes (of ancient authors and sources, of modern authors and of subjects).

In the introduction (pp. 1–24) LaCoste first introduces briefly the story of the Jews in the land of Egypt and provides *status quaestionis* that underlines the scarcity of the studies on the relation between the physical environment and Jewish literature. When one looks at the provided bibliography at this point, one can easily notice that it is extensive (15 pages) but includes publications almost exclusively in English and French. What follows is the presentation of the methodological basis for the study: the idea of a "lived space," the "affective bond between people and place" (p. 13) called *topophilia* and bodily experiences as a crucial factor that creates meaning. Finally, the author presents the narratives that will be examined in the study (Artapanus' *On the Jews*, Ezekiel the Tragedian's *Exagoge*, the Wisdom of Solomon and Philo's *Life of Moses*) and the structure of the study itself.

The first chapter (pp. 25–64), entitled "Jewish Life *within* Egypt: A Regional Analysis of Judaism in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt," provides an interesting perspective on Jewish life of the period. The author analyses a variety of witnesses from Egypt, grouping them geographically into three distinct categories: the Nile Valley, the Delta and the Fayum. In this way the better understanding of what "Jewish life in Egypt" really means is ascertained, thereby providing a point of departure for any further analysis. One may wonder if the analysed issue is really Judaism, as the subtitle claims, or rather Jewish life, broadly speaking, especially

given the fact that its religious aspect (due to the unavoidable lack of sources) is not always the central point.

Chapter 2 (pp. 65–87), in its earlier version, was already published as N. LaCoste, “Writing the Exodus in Egypt: The Role of Place in Shaping Jewish Narratives”, *JSP* 25 (2016) 274–298. The author analyses the wider background of different (not only Jewish) exodus narratives of the four compositions from Egypt. She indicates three common characteristics: the focus on the experience in Egypt, the depiction of Moses primarily as a leader and the environmental details included in the narratives. One may reasonably expect a more detailed analysis of the environmental issues in the current structure of the study, even at the cost of dispensing with the second point (dedicated to Moses), which is loosely associated with the aim of the study.

In the third chapter (pp. 88–106), LaCoste provides an examination of “the hydric terminology in the exodus narratives;” this is where she makes some important points of the study. The comparison of the terms that were used to describe different bodies of water in the analysed compositions allows for drawing a suggestive connection between the Jewish experience in Egypt and the narratives written there. The systematic way of dealing with the terminology (the Nile, other bodies of water and the Sea of Reeds) facilitates maintaining the precision of the discourse. One can only wonder to what extent the result of the query would change after an analysis of a broader range of source texts.

Chapter 4, “Shifting Perceptions of the Land of Egypt” (pp. 107–126), is focused on the change that happened in the Jewish worldview. Egypt – originally understood as a place of slavery, intrinsically “other” than the Jewish reality – became for the diaspora a new home where they lived and from which they benefited. The author tries to spot traces of this change in perception within the literary compositions written in Egypt by focusing on the exodus narratives. A minor issue in this and the following chapter is the unexplained (even if not unexplainable) disappearance of the *Exagoge* from the set of the analysed texts.

In the final, fifth chapter, LaCoste examines the traditions about the origins and the source of the Nile flood. She begins with the description of the flood itself and its depiction in the literature. She then continues with the analysis of different perspectives on the source of the flood: Egyptian, Greek and Jewish. This background allows for a better understanding of how the elements of these viewpoints were incorporated into Jewish traditions preserved in the Wisdom of Solomon, *On the Jews* and *Life of Moses*. All of these compositions show some familiarity with the earlier traditions but simultaneously elaborate them in light of the Jewish worldview.

The recurring issue in the study is the lack of precision, especially regarding the references used. Too often one can find references to the books without any page numbers; this is natural when indicating the study as a whole but a precise

source is expected for supporting a specific opinion.¹ References are sometimes erroneous,² even as far as not reflecting precisely the original scholar's statements.³ There are cases when a similar lack of precision can be noticed with reference to the sources: there are minor slips⁴ as well as some erroneous readings.⁵

In some cases, the study presents claims that are not well founded. The statement on p. 75 may serve as an example: "In the book of Exodus, the only plague that does not touch the Hebrews is the final plague." In fact, the same characteristic is also mentioned (both by the MT and the LXX) with reference to the fourth (Exod 8:18–19), the fifth (9:4,6–7), the seventh (9:26) and the ninth plague (10:23). Likewise, the assumption that the so-called "Passover Letter" from Elephantine is "the earliest evidence for the book of Exodus in Egypt" (p. 71) is not valid because there is no direct quotation. Moreover, there are some important differences between the biblical regulations and those found in the letter.

Presenting the text from *CIJ* II 1537, the author claims that "this passage shows us that despite its dangers, Jews were involved in the overseas trade industry" (p. 32; cf. similar claim on pp. 63 and 114) and provides in footnote no. 30 "other texts from Egypt" attesting Jewish "trade along bodies of water," namely *C.Pap.Jud.* III 518b and (once again) *CIJ* II 1537. In fact, none of these texts confirms Jewish overseas trade. *CIJ* II 1537 speaks about a Jew "saved from the sea"

- 1 E.g., p. 5, n. 17: not only is the book of Gruen mentioned without any page numbers, the claim that "his arguments are not universally accepted" is not even supported by any reference; p. 40, n. 78: the reference to Modrzejewski, *Jews* (presumably 127); p. 68, n. 16; p. 131, n. 17 and 19: (almost identical) references to the whole paper.
- 2 E.g., p. 117, n. 31: to Modrzejewski, *Jews*, 157; moreover, the book of Modrzejewski is consistently referred to as *The Jews in Egypt*, while the proper title is *The Jews of Egypt*; the insignificant issue here is the assumption (apparent in the bibliography and in the index) that Méléze is the middle name of Modrzejewski – in fact, it is his surname used after his naturalization in France; El Kanais is not identical to El Atawla, TM Geo 4861 (as on p. 32) but to Paneion, TM Geo 2047; also references to the study itself, e.g., p. 135, n. 35.
- 3 E.g., p. 55: "According to Modrzejewski, the *proseuche*'s location at the edge of the town may reflect a desire on the part of Jews to live apart from non-Jews," while in fact, he states that "one might think the Jews of Egypt wished to distance themselves from their 'idolatrous' neighbors. Notwithstanding, in the purely Jewish regions of Judea, where no pagans dwelt, synagogues were frequently to be found next to the city walls (Gamla) or a fortress (Masada and Herodium)," Modrzejewski, *Jews*, 89. The dating of the Wisdom of Solomon to "around 50 CE" (pp. 20 and 117) does not reflect exactly Winston's claim that "the likeliest setting for Wisd" is the time of Caligula, i.e., 37–41 CE (D. Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible 43; Garden City: Doubleday 1979) 23 nor his preliminary statement that "various scholars have placed it anywhere between 220 BCE and 50 CE" (Winston, *Wisdom*, 20).
- 4 E.g., p. 46: Ξενεδώρου instead of Ξενεφύρεος; p. 98: "λίμναι [pl.] describes (...) a lake"; similarly, on p. 99: κρήναι [pl.] – "a fountain", φρέατα [pl.] – "a well". Sometimes the attributions are not clear enough, e.g., p. 89, n. 2: "Ye'or [Hebrew!]" is the term used throughout the LXX [Greek!] book of Exodus to refer to the Nile."
- 5 E.g., p. 102: "in [Exod] 15:8, instead of the depths in the Hebrew we have the word μέσση", while תְּהֵאֵלָה > τὰ κύματα; p. 130, n. 15: "the term Nile appears in the Syriac text," while all three mentioned passages have נַחַל, i.e., "river."

but without any reference to trading. *C.Pap.Jud.* III 518b provides some details about the riverine transport of grain but does not explicitly mention Jews. Furthermore, the context of the use of the name Sambathaios (it is not even certain that he was a Jew) is not clear due to the poor preservation of the papyrus.

Overreading the Nile in the Bible is another example. The assumption that the HB uses five different names for the Nile (p. 89: *Ye'or, nachal Mizraim, Shihôr, nahar Mizraim, yam Mizraim*) is not obvious and contrasting it with the homogeneity of the LXX is clearly a mistake, as LaCoste herself provides numerous different LXX correspondences to the five terms. In addition, the identification of the Nile with Gihon from Gen 2:13 (p. 143, n. 75) cannot be taken for granted nowadays. Similarly, the statement: “the Nile is compared to the Garden of Eden” (p. 143, n. 77) based on Gen 13:10 (where the Nile is not even mentioned) is a bit excessive.

Despite these lapses, the study presented by LaCoste is important, inspiring and instructive. The strongest advantage of the book is a fresh approach to the text that is focused on the physical environment and its influence on literary compositions. This method applied to the different biblical as well as “noncanonical” texts can provide new insights into already known ancient works. The author’s ability to combine geographical data with ancient sources in order to shed light on the redactional process of the exodus narratives is invaluable. In the conclusion, the author states that “the aim of this study was to open up new avenues of research that would further contribute to our understanding of early Judaism.” (p. 158) This aim was fully achieved, in my opinion. I also look forward to the ongoing exploration of the future areas of research indicated in the conclusion of the book.