

BOOK REVIEW

Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria. By Maren R. NIEHOFF. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xiv + 222. Hardcover, £53.00/\$85.00. ISBN 978-1-107-00072-8. \$85.00.

Context, context, context. In this highly original analysis, Niehoff, in many respects, offers up a fascinating study of different forms of contextualization. Her subject is a “comprehensive study of Jewish Bible exegesis in its immediate Alexandrian context.” With an organizing focus on Philo, she explores the varied and changing culture of Jewish Bible exegetes active in Alexandria, from the Ptolemaic period through Philo’s own career. In particular she reads the biblical exegetes in context with the Homeric scholia. In doing so, she reconstructs a fair amount of the Alexandrian intellectual world, since the fragments require contextualization at every stage of the process. Part of her approach is to consider the implied audiences each body of fragments appears to address. Along the way she considers several intriguing issues. How do several different cultural streams come together to produce a Philo? She finds him, and earlier Jewish biblical exegetes, in differing dialogic relationships with the traditions of Homeric scholia, “The hermeneutics involved in both contexts emerged in a similar historical environment and followed surprisingly similar rules” (3). She explores how the use of allegory grows throughout Philo’s career, as he changes from a scholar using the then up-to-date critical methods, to a more conservative one, who feels any oddities in the Bible can be explained through allegorical approaches. Perhaps her most intriguing find is, as she foregrounds in her acknowledgements, “there may have been significant links between the Homeric scholia and Jewish Bible exegesis in Alexandria” (xi).

Niehoff divides her work into three Parts, the first of which, “Early Jewish Responses to Homeric Scholarship,” explores the *Letter of Aristeas*, and its account of the translation of the Old Testament into Greek. In his conservative response to the approaches Alexandrian Homeric scholars developed, Aristeas provides a negative account, a mirror image of how some of his contemporaries would have been approaching the text. The *Letter* gives no account of the actual translation from Hebrew, only an assertion that the *LXX* is authentic. Implicitly, argues Niehoff, the author of the *Letter* disapproves of some of his own col-

leagues, who apparently employ text-critical methods to the Bible: “the notion of scriptural sanctity and critical scholarship were unbridgeable contrasts for the author” (19). He instead seeks to protect the *LXX* from later emendation or alteration, but in doing so evidences his awareness of current critical methods: “It emerges that the author reacted to the academic activity of his colleagues by offering an authentic Greek text of the Bible, which must be protected against critical work” (27). Other Jewish exegetes, however, such as Demetrius and Aristobulus, whose fragments are preserved in Eusebius, clearly adopt some of the concerns of the Alexandrian Homeric critics, as well as betraying a larger Aristotelian influence, evident in concerns over verisimilitude, and over apparent contradictions between different passages, “Demetrius’ fragments provide early evidence of positive connections between biblical and Homeric scholarship” (38, cf. 55). Niehoff sees Aristobulus, in particular, as more philosophical, applying more metaphorical solutions to textual problems: “Aristobulus emerges as exceptionally close to Aristotle” (71).

Part II, “Critical Homeric Scholarship in the Fragments of Philo’s Anonymous Colleagues,” situates Philo by demonstrating his differences with his contemporaries. Some anonymous contemporary exegetes, for instance, apply something close to the techniques of comparative mythology to analyze the Tower of Babel episode (comparing it to the myth of the Aloeidae), which he rejects. In their analysis of biblical texts they evidence the influence of Aristotle, and Alexandrian Homeric text-critics, seeing parallels between Homeric epic and the Bible. They place the story of Isaac in a context of actual narratives of child sacrifice, resolving interpretive issues by arguing for historical distance, as Aristotle does in the fragments of the *Aporemata Homerica*. They thus argue that the Bible, and its religion, has developed and evolved over time. Philo himself espouses a strongly conservative perspective, that Moses has written “eternal, unchanging truth” (95). His contemporaries, in strong contrast, criticize some of God’s acts, such as the confusing of languages in Genesis, as making matters worse for humanity. The section concludes with discussion of how the biblical exegetes, applying Alexandrian Homeric text-critical methods to passages with grammatical problems or flaws in the Greek text, were willing to correct words or phrases. While neither Philo nor his anonymous colleagues know Hebrew (they *only* know the Old Testament in the *LXX*), Philo nonetheless argues that the “flaws” could be explained by finding deeper meaning of some sort.

In Part III, “The Inversion of Homeric Scholarship by Philo,” the focus moves to Philo’s own approaches, seen in the diachronic and synchronic context

REVIEW OF NIEHOFF, *JEWISH EXEGESIS & HOMERIC SCHOLARSHIP* 3

of Alexandrian scholarship. As Niehoff demonstrates, Philo evolves a hybrid approach that remains partly rooted in Aristotelian approaches (he pursues an authorial intent, focused on the literal words of the [Greek] text), while largely following an allegorizing tendency, rooted in Platonic approaches. Perhaps his biggest contrast with other biblical exegetes of his time is his tendency to explain contradictions and other textual problems by means of non-literal approaches.

This book should be of interest to a wide range of audiences, those interested in Philo, in later rabbinic modes of interpretation, in the Homeric scholia, and those pursuing linkage between the Bible and Greek culture.

BRUCE LOUDEN

University of Texas El Paso, blouden@utep.edu