

BOOK REVIEW

Jewish Fictional Letters from Hellenistic Egypt: The Epistle of Aristeas and Related Literature. By L. MICHAEL WHITE and G. ANTHONY KEDDIE. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2018. Pp. xxiii + 462. Paperback, \$47.35. ISBN: 978-1-628-37185-7

The Epistle of Aristeas narrates the translation of the Torah into Greek by 72 Judean translators at the behest of King Ptolemy of Egypt, and it represents itself as a letter sent from a certain Aristeas to one Philocrates. This book intends to focus attention on its epistolary form and the consequences of such a focus for our reading of the work.

The book is formed of four parts. The introduction focuses on fictional letters' social reality and seeks to summarise scholarship on letter writing in antiquity and on approaches to the Epistle of Aristeas more specifically. The first chapter proper provides a more in-depth introduction to the Epistle of Aristeas, a discussion of its genre and form, a Greek text and facing English translation and annotations in footnotes. The second chapter discusses the reception of the translation from Philo, Josephus, Demetrius and Hecataeus, and Early Christian writers, similarly introducing the relevant texts, providing the original text and a translation and offering additional comments in footnotes. The third chapter deals with related Epistolary texts in Second Temple Judaism, such as 2 and 3 Maccabees, the letters quoted by Eupolemus and the Greek additions to Esther. The format is the same as the preceding two chapters.

The majority of the book is taken up with presenting primary sources. This is important in itself since many discussions and editions of the relevant texts are now difficult to find or to access. However, the book does not provide "notes and commentary" (my italics, see full quotation below) on the texts. Rather, footnotes explain aspects of language and historical importance; nothing like a running commentary is attempted. More importantly, the footnotes are crammed with the authors' results of searches in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*; the reader is given numerous "cf.s" with little guidance. The reasoning for this, though, is clear, at least in the notes on the Epistle of Aristeas: lexical evidence is used to argue for a relatively late date for the Epistle. This is problematic, not least because our knowledge of

Hellenistic prose is fairly poor, but also because the Epistle's use of vocabulary that happens to become more common at a later date does not necessarily mean it should be down-dated. Indeed, this argument at times amounted to chicanery: in arguing that *χαριστήριον* is a late word despite the plural usage being attested in Xenophon and Polybius, the authors point to the problem that the earlier authors are preserved in much later writers and imply without evidence that the later sources edit the language of the earlier texts that they preserve. That being said, their lexical study does have benefits, such as showing a closer link between the Epistle and Philo than I believe has been previously demonstrated.

The second chapter deals with the reception of the narrative contained in the Epistle. Its addition in a volume about fictional letters from Hellenistic Egypt is rather tangential. It seems to be present because the Epistle is the core that holds the book together.

The third chapter on epistolary forms roughly contemporary to the Epistle is particularly useful. However, it suffers from not being connected to the introduction in which the "social reality of fictional letters" (1) is discussed and scholarly positions are outlined. This is a missed opportunity to synthesise the history of scholarship, the interpretation of the Epistle, and the specificities of contemporary texts into a forceful argument about the importance of the form of the Epistle. Reading the introduction followed by Chapter 3 will be a rewarding exercise in that there is ample room to build on their observations.

The work's key value, therefore, is as a sourcebook of texts related to the Epistle, but one to be used in conjunction with earlier works. Its argument for the importance of the Epistle's form is made on the level of generality, but it is hoped that such a wealth of information in one place will allow for further discussion into what is clearly a fruitful line of inquiry. My central concern is that, while it aims to renew interest in a text deserving more attention, it attempts to do too many things at once: to make an argument about literary form and interpretation; to provide a text with commentary; and to trace the Epistle's reception all at once. In this case, the authors only half succeed on all fronts.

There are two issues regarding the book's presentation. First is the claim on the blurb that the volume "presents for the first time a complete Greek text and English translation with introduction, notes and commentary, of the Epistle of Aristeas." This ignores Moses Hadas' important 1951 work, *Aristeas to Philocrates (letter of Aristeas)* that does precisely that, despite it being in the bibliography. Second, page ix gives the names of four members of the original seminar that led to the volume (M.L. Case, Michael A. Flexsenhar III, Bradley F. King, and Bartolo A.

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Natoli) and explains that a number of the introductions and compilations of scholarship are in fact based on their work. It is unfortunate that early career scholars could not have been recognised formally as co-authors.

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