
U. tackles the topic of the significance of images of Egypt in the rabbinic hermeneutical imagination. The data set of Jewish sources that she uses for this study ranges from the Hebrew Bible’s Exodus narrative to a 17th century painting by Poussin. The author’s range of relevant primary source material is a noteworthy feature of this work. U.’s methodology emphasizes interpreting rabbinic literature’s polemical images of Egyptian icons from the perspective of Egyptology, and in so doing provides great insight not only into what and how much the rabbis knew about Egypt, but also to what extent they manipulated their portrayals of it for the purposes of commenting on the dilemmas of their own lives, especially with respect to questions related to diaspora and Rome. Throughout the book, U. describes this process as a rabbinic “inversion” of Egypt’s otherness into a concept that typically serves to reinforce Judaized ideologies.

After the introduction, the book is divided into ten chapters on ten different topics, which are then further sub-divided into smaller units. Of the ten chapters, several titles include “The Nile,” “Egyptian Festivals,” “Alexandria,” “The Egyptian Gods, Language, and Customs,” and “The ‘Findings of Moses’ in Art and Text.” Unfortunately, the book is so well organized into distinct motifs that at times it reads as if it is an analytic handbook of case studies that neglects to take pause to provide its reader with a clear and synthetic conclusion of its various sub-units, or a discussion of the larger costs and benefits of its oftentimes erudite textual analyses. Contributing to this overall impression is the lack of a conclusion to the book itself. Nevertheless, the work’s historiographical robustness, comparative approach, and various arguments about the role of Egypt in midrash offer scholars a rich tapestry of information with which to continue to interpret the complex interfaces between Jews and “others” over time. For example, one of the more detailed chapters in this book treats the midrashic depictions of the Egyptian landscape and the Nile about which Ulmer argues that “entrenched in the midrashic scenes and their associated theology are the memory of the Exodus and the circumstances of the Roman occupation and the subsequent exile to the Diaspora,” and because of the lateness of some midrashic sources that were themselves the product of the diasporic Jews, these texts, which increasingly engage Egypt, “construct memories of Egypt and enrich them with Egyptian cultural icons” (80). These arguments represent a few of the book’s many notable contributions to the important scholarly enterprise of reconstructing rabbinic collective memory regarding Egypt, one of the most enduring historical and imaginative locales in Judaism.

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