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Uriel Rappaport

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3 Maccabees and the Jews of Egypt

URIEL RAPPAPORT

N. CLAYTON CROY. *3 Maccabees*. Septuagint Commentary Series. Boston and Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006. Pp. xxii + 143.

JOSEPH MÉLÈZE MODRZEJEWSKI. *Troisième livre des Maccabées*. La bible d'Alexandrie 15.3. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2008. Pp. 190.

3 Maccabees was written in Greek by an anonymous Jew from Alexandria. These two premises are agreed upon by almost all scholars who deal with this book. On other questions concerning 3 Macc opinions are more diverse: what was its purpose? how historically accurate is it? what was the *Sitz im Leben* of the its author? The answers to each of these questions derive from the dating of 3 Macc, and on this topic scholars propose dates that sprawl from the second century B.C.E. to the middle of the first century C.E.—dates which often depend on the answers to the questions above. We have here then a circular argumentation, and there is yet no consensus about 3 Macc's date. The dividing line is 30 B.C.E., when Ptolemaic Egypt became a Roman province. Dating on either side of this line elicits a different understanding of the purpose of the author and the situation of the Egyptian Jewish community of his time.¹

The ramifications of these questions reach far beyond 3 Macc itself. They relate to other writings that belong to Jewish Hellenistic (mostly Alexandrian) literature, such as the letter of Aristeeas and 2 Maccabees, and to the history of the Jewish communities in Egypt, their relations with the rulers there (either Ptolemaic or Roman), their attitude toward their host society and the internal relations within their own community.

1. A review of the various suggestions about the date of 3 Macc can be found in both Croy (pp. xi–xiii) and Modrzejewski (pp. 118–23). For their own opinions see below.

These raise also the subject of the Hellenization of Judaism in general and in the Diaspora in particular. How do we define the Hellenization of the Jews? What did they preserve of their own culture and what was adapted from the victorious Greek civilization? What components of the Greek East did they adapt or reject? (Why, for example, did Jews adapt its language and reject its religion?) Some insight into this questions can surely be extracted from 3 Maccabees. Jewish Hellenistic literature and Diaspora Judaism has long attracted scholarly interest and continues to do so,² and the two books on 3Macc reviewed here contribute, each one in its own way, to our understanding of this text and beyond.

The first, by Croy, includes a short introduction (pp. ix–xxii) and a long commentary (pp. 39–121). Between the two parts the reader will find a Greek text of 3 Macc and an English translation on the facing pages (pp. 2–33). The printed Greek text is not a critical edition of the text but a reproduction of only one manuscript, the Alexandrinus, a somewhat awkward decision despite the occasional references to alternative readings in the commentary. Both the text and the translation contribute to the convenience of readers who, while using the commentary, wish to refer to the text of the book itself. The second book, by Modrzejewski, is arranged differently. The introduction is detailed (pp. 29–127) and the concise commentary (pp. 128–74) accompanies a French translation and refers often to the relevant sections of the introduction.

The introduction of Modrzejewski's book is updated and innovative. The author's expertise in papyrology and history of law brings new insights to his discussion. It contributes on the one hand to a deeper understanding of 3 Macc and the history of Egyptian Jewry, and illuminates aspects of the administration of the Ptolemaic regime in Egypt on the other. Modrzejewski refers to the Herakleopolis papyri, first published in

2. To show the wide scholarly interest in this subject, I refer to the following recent monographs: John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora* (Edinburgh, 1996); Margaret H. Williams, *The Jews among the Greeks and Romans* (Baltimore, Md., 1998); Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora* (Cambridge Mass, 2002; Hebrew translation 2004); and part of the immense literature on the subject of Hellenization in general and of the Jews in particular can be found in the bibliographies there. Also two annotated translations of 3 Macc appeared in recent years in collections of the Apocrypha. One in Italian (A. Passoni Dell'Acqua in *Apocrifi dell'Antico Testamento*, IV, ed. P. Sacchi [Brescia, 2000], 573–664 and the other in Polish (M. Wojciechowski in *Apokryfy z Biblii greckiej* [Varsovie, 2001], 24–96 [non vidi]). Both are cited and referred to in Modrzejewski's book. It may be stated also that Modrzejewski's bibliography is much more European (it includes, besides English, publications in French, German, and Italian) whereas Croy's is predominantly in English.

2001, that mention the Jewish *politeuma* there, a key to understanding the status of Jews and the Jewish communities in Egypt (the *xōra*) and in Alexandria (pp. 76–82). His discussion on this subject may terminate the argument about the definition of the *politeumata*. It should be clarified that the argument about this question is not about the right of the Jews to live according to their ancestral laws but about the significance of defining a Jewish community *politeuma* for its rights and conduct. The use of this term in the Herakleopolis papyri does not confirm the idea that being called *politeuma* made a Jewish community equal to the Hellenistic *polis* (primarily Alexandria), and Modrzejewski's explanation can be taken as definitive.³

Modrzejewski makes several interesting points in his discussion. One concerns the position of the priests (*kobanim*) in Jewish society who, according to Modrzejewski, belonged to the Jewish elite and religious leadership of Egyptian Jewry (pp. 90–93). As for the purpose of 3 Macc, Modrzejewski suggests that the author, being himself a “fundamentalist,” intended to counterbalance the dedication and bravery of the Maccabean leadership in Judaea to their ancestral religion with the story of the dedication of the Jews of the Egyptian Diaspora to their religious heritage—even ready to endanger their very lives for it (p. 123).

Detailed scrutiny of the royal Ptolemaic legal system reveals that the measures that the king took against the Jews were not arbitrary inventions of the author of 3 Macc but conform to the procedures of the legal system customary in Ptolemaic Egypt. It may be concluded then that the author of 3 Macc knew this system well and may have been a government official with some expertise in legal procedures. An example for this supposition, which also highlights the difference between the two books under discussion, is their treatment of the word *apotumpanismos* (3 Macc 3.27). For Croy it means “torture” and in his commentary he stresses the gravity of the punishment that threatens those who will dare to give shelter to Jews, the intensification of the pathos in the sentence, and a discussion about familial solidarity (p. 71). In Modrzejewski's introduction the term is explained within the framework of Ptolemaic jurisdiction. It is a punishment by burning, preserved for arsonists, or may refer to another punishment that resembles the Roman crucifixion and was preserved for traitors. (This discussion covers pp. 64–67 and we skip the unpleasant details and its history.) The difference in the treatment of this term by

3. *Politeuma* is not mentioned in 3 Macc but the treatment of this term is important for the understanding of the status of the Jews in Egypt and reflects the wide scope of Modrzejewski introduction to 3 Macc.

Croy and Modrzejewski illuminates the difference between the two books: one rich in widening the horizons into social, juridical, and political history of Ptolemaic Egypt and its Jews; the other mainly literal and philological, treading the paths of preceding scholarship.

About the date of 3 Macc both Croy and Modrzejewski are indecisive. Each presents the various opinions of former scholars and finally his own preference. Croy proposes a flexible dating “within the range of 100 B.C.E. to 50 C.E.” (p. xiii), and Modrzejewski states that “finally two hypotheses remain open”—either the beginning of the first century B.C.E. or the early Roman rule over Egypt—but finally takes a position in favor of the earlier date (p. 123).

Both Croy and Modrzejewski rightly stress the affinity of 3 Macc to various Jewish writings in style and content. The attempt of Philopator to enter the Temple in Jerusalem (3 Macc 1:10–2:24) reminds of the Heliodorus affair in 2 Macc 3:8–40. The familiarity with the customs of the royal court is typical to the authors of both 3 Macc and the letter of Aristaeas; the plan of Philopator to exterminate the Jews of Egypt is reminiscent of Haman’s similar plan (Est 3:13). Yet this last comparison ignores a major difference between the “genocide” (so, rightly, in the words of Croy, p. 65) decreed by Philopator and that of Ahasuerus, instigated by Haman. Haman’s plan is ecumenical (as noted by Croy, p. 71), it covers all the Achaemenid empire that equals, in the perspective of the Esther Scroll, the inhabited world (“destruction of the Jews wherever they live,” Croy, *ibid.*). But more important—contrary to Philopator’s, and as well to Antiochus’ religious persecution, that allowed exclusion from the persecution to those Jews who were ready to apostate—Haman’s plan did not let any Jew be rescued even if he was ready to abandon Judaism. This difference shows Haman’s plan to be more extreme—or even racist, in modern terminology—compared to those mentioned above, and indeed it is more difficult to explain the anti-Judaism described in Esther Scroll than that of the two Hellenistic kings.⁴

The attitude of 3 Macc toward the Hellenization of the Jews may contribute certain perspective to our understanding of anti-Judaism. As far as the adaptation of Hellenism by Jews is reflected in 3 Macc it is mainly lingual,⁵ whereas from the perspective of religion 3 Macc demonstrates

4. See U. Rappaport, “The *Sitz im Leben* of the Masoretic Version of Esther Scroll” (Hebrew), *Beit Mikra* 53.2 (2008): 123–37.

5. Croy describes 3 Macc’s Greek as “lavish vocabulary and bombastic style” (p. xiii); Modrzejewski does not reject this definition but his overall judgment is more forgiving: “richness of his vocabulary; the high level of his literary culture” (p. 115).

an adamant refusal to share with the surrounding ceremonial or spiritual religiosity.⁶ Its conservative Judaism is neither looking to please non-Jews nor seeking harmony between opposing cultures but is intended to chastize those Jews who were not devoted unconditionally to their ancestral heritage. Why then should one be so tolerant, or even enthusiastic, in adopting Greek? It seems to me that from the practical perspective of 3 Macc, speaking Greek meant belonging to the Greek-speaking elite of conquerors. The author's attitude toward the Greek language and manners was the same as that of other immigrants—Syrians, Phoenicians, and others—who strove to belong to the higher echelons of the Ptolemaic state and to differentiate themselves from the native Egyptians. They were aware of the necessity of becoming Greek speakers (*Hellenophones*) for joining the Ptolemaic Greek governing class and its bureaucracy of all kinds.⁷ 3 Macc is an example of the Janus position of at least part of the Egyptian Jews: to belong to the “Greeks” as far as it relates to the benefits that result from loyalty to the regime, yet to remain unconditionally loyal to Judaism at the same time. Adopting a new language did not raise general opposition among Jews, as can be seen by the Aramaization of the Jewish communities in Babylonia and in Egypt before Alexander the Great. Language was not by itself a means of assimilation in Jewish history, neither in Erets Israel nor in the Diaspora. Yet an attitude of haughty monotheism, polemics, and an insulting attitude to others (as in the depiction of the Egyptians in the exodus story⁸ or, from the point of view of the non-Jews, refusal to dine with them⁹) could have given place to anti-Jewish feelings among certain non-Jews, such as, for example, Egyptian priests.

From this point of view 3 Macc may represent a phase in the development of the anti-Jewish phenomenon.¹⁰ It presents a bipolar Jewish atti-

6. Compare to John J. Collins's definition: “There was a limit to Hellenization, which is best expressed in the distinction between cult and culture” (J. J. Collins and G. E. Sterling, eds., *Hellenism in the Land of Israel* [Notre Dame, Ind., 2001], 55).

7. The Jews in Ptolemaic Egypt were primarily soldiers, military settlers (*klêruchoi*, allotment holders), policemen, officials, artisans, merchants, etc. Many of those occupations necessitated knowledge of Greek as a condition to belong to this class of the population. As a result all or most of the Jews in Egypt pertained to the prerogative section of the population until the arrival of the Romans.

8. On the counterhistory to the exodus story, see P. Schäfer, *Judeophobia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 15–33.

9. *Ibid.*, 209–10, with further references and also in the index s.v. “Exclusiveness.”

10. It should be emphasized that anti-Judaism in the pre-Christian era is a different phenomenon from Christian anti-Judaism/Semitism.

tude of full adaptation of Greek language and style and acquaintance with Ptolemaic bureaucracy and law and loyalty to the pagan regime and, at the same time, an intransigent devotion to monotheistic Judaism. This position, for sure, is common neither to all Jews nor to all authors of Hellenistic Jewish writings (the letter of Aristeas is an example of a more compromising attitude). Still, this form of Hellenization is unique to the meeting of the Jews with Hellenism because of the barrier that limited the intrusion of syncretism, so common in other Eastern cultures of the Hellenistic-Roman period,¹¹ into the core of the Jewish religion—monotheism.¹²

Some remarks should be also made about the translations in the two reviewed books. Croy translates the phrase *tôn kata polin strategôn* in 3 Macc 4.4 as: “the generals in every city,”¹³ whereas Modrzejewski’s translation is “les stratèges . . . villes par villes” (the *strategoï*, town by town). The term *strategos* in Ptolemaic Egypt refers to a governor of a district and not to a military officer, or general. The *poliō* is the capital of the district (the *metropoliō*), which obviously does not have the status of a *poliō* in the classic or Hellenistic meaning of the term. Modrzejewski’s translation, then, more precisely reflects the meaning of the original text of 3 Macc.

I wonder also if it would not have been more sensitive as well as precise to translate *phulon* in 3 Macc 5.5 not by “race” but by “nation” (as the

11. Most illuminating comparison is with the Phoenicians, to whom Fergus Millar turned attention as an example of oriental people that preserved meaningful ingredients of its culture—though they quickly adapted to Hellenism—including certain level of Hellenistic syncretism of their pantheon. See F. Millar, “The Phoenician Cities: A Case Study of Hellenization,” *Proceedings of Cambridge Philological Society* 209 (1983): 57–71 (also in vol. 3 of his collected papers, *The Greek World, the Jews, and the East*, ed. H. M. Cotton and G. M. Rogers [Chapel Hill, N.C., 2006], 32–50). The phenomenon of Hellenization is dealt there in other articles as well. An attempt to syncretize the God of Israel and its Temple in Jerusalem in the first third of the second century B.C.E. failed completely and it reminds of the uncompromising attitude toward paganism of the author of 3 Macc. 3 Macc demonstrates on the one hand the wide scope of Hellenization among Egyptian Jewry and on the other the deep antagonism between the Jews and their host society which led up to the disastrous revolt under Trajan.

12. On broader aspects of this subject, see Jonathan A. Goldstein, “Jewish Acceptance and Rejection of Hellenism,” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, ed. E. P. Sanders (London, 1981), 64–87. Evidently Jewish monotheism should not be separated from the Bible, cult, and law.

13. Hadas translated it “respective generals” and both Hadas’s “respective” and Modrzejewski’s “town by town” are more accurate than “every city” for the *kata polin* of the Greek text.

old translation of C. W. Emmet in R. H. Charles *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* [Oxford, 1913] and of H. Anderson in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* II, ed. J. H. Charlesworth [New York, 1985] had done).

As for the commentaries, whereas Modrzejewski's explains specific words, terms, and sentences—referring to the introduction for an overview and synthesis—Croy's commentary accompanies the text as parallel version to the story, explaining the plot, and stopping for interpretation at specific points.

In conclusion Modrzejewski's book is more updated and more alert to the legal significance that is hidden behind the vicissitudes of the plot of 3 Macc. Modrzejewski also analyzes the Jewish society in Egypt from a socio-juridical angle that widens the perspective of his earlier book, *The Jews of Egypt: From Ramses II to Emperor Hadrian* (Princeton, N.J., 1997).¹⁴ Croy's book is the first detailed commentary in English of 3Macc since M. Hadas's commentary of 1953.¹⁵ It is more descriptive than critical, and though detailed here and there, some issues, in my opinion, should have been dealt with more fully and others more deeply (for instance, Philopator's attempt on the Jerusalem Temple is compared to Antiochus's sacrilege and robbing of the Temple, which are far from being similar, while Heliodorus's affair in Jerusalem should have been compared and analyzed more thoroughly).¹⁶ Nevertheless Croy's work bridges a half-century gap in research and bibliography on 3 Macc and is friendly to the reader.

Research on 3 Macc advances our knowledge and deepens our understanding of various aspects of Jewish life in the Hellenistic Diaspora, of the writings produced there, and of the anti-Judaism of pre-Christian antiquity. The two books reviewed here contribute to this greater project.

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14. Original French edition: *Les Juifs d'Égypte: De Ramsès II à Hadrien* (Paris, 1991).

15. Moses Hadas, *The Third and Fourth Books of Maccabees* (New York, 1953) (3 Macc on pp. ix–85). I omit mention of other translations and shorter commentaries in collections of intertestamental literature that can be found in the bibliographies of Croy and Modrzejewski

16. The resemblance between the Philopator and the Heliodorus affairs is much greater than that between either one of them and that of Antiochus IV. Neither Philopator nor Heliodorus came to rob the Temple. Heliodorus rather demanded an inspection of the accounts of the Temple's finances so as to confiscate what he deemed to belong to the royal treasury (2 Macc 3.13–14). See U. Rappaport, "Did Heliodorus Try to Rob the Treasures of the Jerusalem Temple?" (forthcoming).