

Joan E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria. Philo's 'Therapeutae' Reconsidered*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. xv + 417 pp. ISBN 0 19 925961 5.

This book is very well researched and original. The author brings a wealth of archeological, Hellenistic, Jewish Palestinian and Christian sources to bear on Philo's treatise *On the Contemplative Life*, which describes a group of Jewish philosophers outside Alexandria. Taylor proposes to read this tractate as a rhetorical description of a historical reality, which can be recovered to a significant extent if we read between the lines and are not misled by the rhetoric. As the title suggests, the focus is here on the women of the group. Taylor reconstructs them as philosophers of virtually equal standing to their male colleagues and as part of a larger phenomenon of Jewish women philosophers in Alexandria. This argument is fascinating and certainly convincing with regard to the women within the group, making an important contribution to our understanding of first-century Judaism. More serious questions arise from Taylor's reconstruction of the group's *Sitz-im-Leben* in Alexandrian life, its antinomian nature and Philo's overall audience in his treatise.

Taylor begins her discussion of the *Therapeutrides* with a general survey of women in the different philosophical schools of the Hellenistic era, concluding with earlier scholars that they were indeed present, especially among the Pythagoreans. Such women were nevertheless perceived with ambivalence, often being transformed into honorary males or criticised as sex partners of leading philosophers. Indicative of this ambivalence is the fact that the only tractates of Pythagorean women philosophers in Alexandria that have survived are those that preach female modesty and lecture on domestic issues, although other, more general tractates were definitely written by them and are still mentioned in earlier sources (244). Taylor then turns to look at Philo and his attitudes towards women. She agrees with other scholars that Philo generally had little sympathy for women, whom he conceptualized as sense-perception and passion, thus threatening male rationality. Against this background, Taylor suggests, Philo felt some discomfort when speaking about the women among the *Therapeutae*, especially since they were situated precisely outside the domestic domain to which he generally confined females (246). At the same time, however, Philo includes the women in the collective designation 'students of Moses' (*Cont.* 63) and explicitly acknowledges that they 'have the same zeal and purpose' as the men (*Cont.* 33). Given his personal values, Philo's description must reflect the reality of the group itself. Taylor then investigates Philo's strategies of accommodating these women who did not fit into his own categories. She discovers that he transforms them into 'mothers of the congregation' (*Cont.* 72) and hesitantly says that they were 'mostly aged virgins' (*Cont.* 68). Both attributes remove them from the realm of promiscuous sexuality and domesticate them. Highlighting the ambiguity of the expression 'mostly aged virgins', Taylor suggests that some of the historical *Therapeutrides* may in fact have had families before entering the group (as the men did) or even may have still been married while leading a celibate life at the Mareotic Lake (266).

In a chapter entitled 'Gendered Space' Taylor explores the physical space to which the *Therapeutrides* had access. Her results are very interesting: while the *semneion*, the equivalent of a synagogue, has a dividing wall in order to protect the women's modesty, the dining hall has no such architectural division, but preserves different sitting areas, while gender separation altogether vanishes in matters of clothing and in the ecstatic singing sessions. These physical arrangements encourage women's equal participation. Even the dividing wall in the *semneion* is relatively low so that women can easily hear the speaker's voice and thus be part of the service (*Cont.* 33). While reflecting stereotypes about female modesty, this situation, Taylor suggests, is far better than the one described by Philo in *Hypothetica* 7:14, where only the husband attends the synagogue service, later explaining to his wife what he has heard. Analyzing Philo's report of the ecstatic singing sessions, Taylor moreover stresses that the *Therapeutae*, both males and females, in fact assume priestly roles. Their singing is described in cultic terms and they use a table with bread and salt, a gesture that Philo explicitly ascribes to 'reverence for the table enshrined in the sacred ves-

tibule of the temple' (*Cont.* 81). Taylor argues that physical gender is transcended here, women entering even the symbolic 'Holy of Holies', which was in the Jerusalem Temple of course reserved for select male priests (308). In Taylor's view, this equality between the sexes derives from the group's general transcendence of the body, which is also expressed in their supposed antinomianism.

At the end of the book Taylor studies the female choir of the group, which joins the male choir in the ecstatic session (*Cont.* 85, 98). Philo explains that this mixing of choruses and their becoming a single one is modeled on the choir 'set up of old beside the Red Sea' (*Cont.* 85). Taylor notes that the Masoretic text does not lend itself very well as a model for the Therapeutic enterprise, since Miriam's choir plays here a separate and highly marginal role (Ex 15:20-1). Taylor suggests that extra-Biblical traditions, partly fragments from Qumran, highlight Miriam's role and may have provided the background to Philo's conceptualization (325-33). In this case, too, a clearly egalitarian tendency becomes visible. This is especially interesting in view of Taylor's argument in an introductory chapter, where she suggests that women may even have functioned as presidents and lecturers of the group (102-3). Philo says that the most senior and knowledgeable member would assume such a position (*Cont.* 31, 79-80). While the terms used in this context are plainly masculine, Taylor adduces other ancient sources to show that they may well have been inclusive of women. Indeed, if Phoebe could in Rom. 16:1 be described as οὐσαν διάκονον τῆς ἐκκλησίας, why should a woman not be implied in the Therapeutic titles πρεσβύτατος and πρόεδρος?

This image of the *Therapeutrides* as Jewish women philosophers of virtually equal standing is anchored in a broader analysis of the group's nature and *Sitz-im-Leben*, which Taylor provides in the first part of her book. This section is partly convincing, providing supportive material for her argument about the women, while also raising problems. Useful is Taylor's chapter entitled 'Locations: the Geographical and Social Locations of the Mareotic Group' (74-104). This revised version of an earlier article by Taylor and P.R. Davies identifies the precise location of the group's settlement on a hill near Alexandria. Following Philo's detailed description in *Cont.* 22-3, Taylor herself has traveled to the area and taken pictures of the spot. The reader may not only enjoy the excitement of the discovery, but more importantly learn that this location — or somewhere near it — was rural but not at all isolated. Indeed, the *Therapeutae* did not set up a desert monastery in the later Christian sense, but rather a retreat surrounded by villages and close to the big city. Like Buddhist retreats the Therapeutic villa was thus not meant to shun civilization, but rather relied on it. This leads Taylor to her second important point, which has already been anticipated by the work of Ross Kraemer, namely the affluent Alexandrian background of the group members. The literacy among both its male and its female members indicates upper-class background where education for all children could be desired and could be afforded. Philo moreover tells us that upon entering the group members left their possessions behind for their children or friends (*Cont.* 13). This detail indicates both that the members came from wealthy backgrounds and that they needed to rely on external sources to support their retreat at the Mareotic Lake. Socially and economically the group must thus have continued to remain in rather close contact with the city of Alexandria.

Taylor then transcends the merely economic connections between the group and Alexandria, which had already been noted in earlier scholarship, and reconstructs a milieu of Alexandrian Jewish families supporting the group both spiritually and economically. This would be the same milieu as Philo himself came from (98). While this is plausible, it is important to remember that there is no evidence for such an extended network. Taylor herself adduces two Philonic passages as proof (*Cont.* 67 and 69), yet both of them speak about members inside the group. Her quotation of *Cont.* 67 on page 98 is even misleading, since it drops the context of the phrase, which distinguishes between junior members, who may be old in years but joined the group only recently, and senior members who 'from early youth have matured and grown up in the contemplative part of

philosophy' [of the group].¹ Taylor's selective quotation gives the impression that these members had grown up in the contemplative part of philosophy outside the group in the said supportive families. If this cannot be proven from Philo's text at all, her subsequent conjectures about the background of the *Therapeutrides* become even more speculative. On page 237 Taylor suggests that the designation 'students of Moses' implies that the group 'forms part of a wider philosophical school of thought to which Philo himself belonged in Alexandria'. Thus, Taylor continues, the *Therapeutrides* 'did not come to this isolated community in order to study allegorical Jewish philosophy, but rather they chose the contemplative lifestyle as a result of their excellence in allegorical Jewish philosophy' (ibid.). The notion of the group's extended network thus emerges as crucial for Taylor's reconstruction of Jewish women philosophers in first century Alexandria. It in fact enables her to generalize the phenomenon, arguing that opportunities for egalitarian education and study existed not only within the special group at the Mareotic Lake, but rather more widely among élite Jewish families in Alexandria. One may well wish with Taylor that this were indeed the case, but Philo at least does not give us any evidence actually to believe it. Moreover, Taylor's reference to the kind of milieu Philo himself came from creates a new problem, since Philo was anything but liberal in these matters. Those who shared his background and *Sitz-im-Leben* may thus also have shared his views on women. In other words, it does not necessarily follow that a man like Philo, who appreciated the *Therapeutrides* out at the Lake, would let his own daughter back home study Torah in an allegorical-philosophical fashion. On the other hand, Philo may have been an isolated conservative, going against the stream of a broad phenomenon, which he did not even consider worthy of note. Given the paucity of the sources and the complexity of the issue, we can only hope that some day new evidence will turn up to provide a definite answer to the highly intriguing question Taylor has raised.

Taylor's interpretation of the *Therapeutae* as a group well anchored in Jewish Alexandria has led her to another interesting yet ultimately unconvincing argument. In chapter 6 she draws a parallel between this group and the famous allegorists Philo mentions in *De Migratione Abrahami* 86-93. At first sight, this is a stimulating comparison, since both groups engaged in allegorical exegesis of Scripture. Yet it is equally important to remember that there were many allegorical readers among Alexandrian Jews. Philo frequently mentions their exegesis, often agreeing, but sometimes also disapproving. The distinguishing mark of the allegorists mentioned in *Migr.* 89-93 is their principled antinomianism. Philo complains that they only pay serious attention to allegory, while treating 'the laws in their literal meaning ... with easy-going neglect' (*Migr.* 89). Whereas this group in Alexandria was apparently a small minority, which has received too much press, not least because of Christian agendas, Taylor thinks of them as a significant group from whose ranks the *Therapeutae* were recruited. In fact, she harmonizes the two groups, suggesting that the extreme allegorists 'may accept the ideal [of halachic observance] ... but still make allowances for certain necessary things' (such as lawsuits on the Sabbath, p. 139). The *Therapeutae*, on the other hand, are transformed into non-observant Jews. Both interpretations, however, seem to me plainly wrong. Philo explicitly says of the extreme allegorists that they purposely abrogated the law, because they were satisfied with the spiritual meaning of Scripture (*Migr.* 91-94). Of the *Therapeutae*, by contrast, Philo himself never says that they were unobservant, and he could be trusted to complain about that as he had done in the case of the extreme allegorists. Moreover, Philo positively says that their life is guided by a 7-day rhythm: 6 days of solitude, studying and fasting, followed by the seventh day 'which they consider most sacred and festive'. On the Sabbath they eat and refresh the body as well as release the cattle from their continuous labour (*Cont.* 36). On the Sabbath they also hold an assembly, with the eldest member giving a 'well reasoned and wise discourse' very much like the regular Sabbath service described by Philo (*De Vita Mosis* 2:216). Finally, the *Therapeutae* sit on the Sabbath 'holding their hands inside [the garment], the right

1 I am quoting Taylor's own translation in the appendix (354), which indicates that her basic understanding of the text is the same as mine.

hand between the chest and the chin and the left withdrawn along the flank' (*Cont.* 30). Strikingly, this is precisely the gesture that an administrator of Roman Egypt identified as an expression of pious Sabbath observance. Philo introduces this administrator as someone who wanted to 'disturb our ancestral customs and especially do away with the law of the seventh day which we regard with most reverence and awe' (*De Somniis* 2:123). Trying to force Jews into work on the Sabbath, this administrator ridiculed observant Jews, saying: 'Or will you appear in your usual guise (μετὰ τοῦ συνήθους σχήματος), with your right hand tucked inside and the left held close to the flank under the cloak, lest you should even unconsciously do anything to be saved?!' (*Somn.* 2:126). If a contemporary observer identified this gesture as a known expression of Jewish commitment to Sabbath observance, who are we today not to do so?

Given the group's clear Sabbath observance it is thus surprising that Taylor finds certain omissions in Philo's report indicative of an antinomian attitude. She stresses, for example, that Philo speaks of the seventh day without explicitly calling it Sabbath. Yet the above quotation from Philo shows that he would often do exactly the same in a clearly general Jewish context. Furthermore, Taylor finds a lack of discussion of purity matters, and no mention of all the Jewish holidays, significant (140-4). Yet we have to remember that Philo, after all, wrote but a short treatise, which he explicitly focused on the issue of a spiritual symposium. Given this framework, he can hardly be expected to deal with every single aspect of the Therapeutic life. Finally, the group's allegorisation of the Temple cannot automatically be taken as an indication of their abrogation of the law (144-5). The case of Philo himself is instructive here. Refuting deep-seated stereotypes about Hellenistic Judaism, he happily combined the different aspects: he allegorized the Temple, recommended pilgrimage to Jerusalem and himself both offered a sacrifice there and headed the embassy to Gaius in order to prevent the setting up of the emperor's statue in the Temple. Allegory and law observance could easily go together in Jewish Alexandria and, as a matter of fact, seem usually to have done so. Thus, if one is looking for the group's roots in Alexandrian Judaism, one has to be careful about Judaism's nature and diversity. The *Therapeutae* can certainly not be assimilated to the extreme allegorists, but maybe they were close to other groups of Jewish Bible readers. At all events, this is a very important topic, which deserves further study.

The last point I wish to discuss is the audience of Philo's treatise *De Vita Contemplativa*. Taylor argues for a Roman audience, which she uses throughout her book to explain different phenomena of Philo's text or problems that have arisen from her own interpretation of it. In the second chapter of the book Taylor explains her reasons for believing that Philo addressed a Roman audience and in particular the emperor Claudius together with his entourage (42-50). The work is an apologetic treatise written to support a Jewish petition of rights, submitted more or less in parallel to Chaeremon's treatise on Egyptian priests. The first reason is the tractate's place within Philo's overall work. As it is part of his writings on the virtues, which are headed by the *Legatio*, Taylor assumes that it also addressed the same audience. Since she believes that the *Leg.* was meant to be read to the Roman emperor, the same must in her view also be true for *Cont.* This is not the place to discuss the audience of the *Leg.*, which I have done elsewhere. Suffice it here to state that I am convinced that this treatise addressed a Jewish audience back home who had become impatient with Philo's policy. No proof for a Roman audience can thus be brought from the *Leg.* Taylor moreover argues that the audience of *Cont.* could not have been Jewish, since Philo explains such basic things as the Sabbath and the Crossing of the Red Sea. Yet in both contexts Philo is not giving details for the sake of information, but explains that the Sabbath was so honoured that it even broke the highly ascetic diet of the group (*Cont.* 35-6) and that the events at the Red Sea were so astonishing that they inspired ecstatic choirs (*Cont.* 86). Furthermore, Philo's comment that 'I know that some hearing this will laugh, but they are people who do things worthy of tears and lamentation' (*Cont.* 73) must not be interpreted in a contemporary political context, as referring to the enemies of the Jewish people (42). This statement should simply be understood in its immediate context: Philo expects that some readers will laugh at the suggestion

that a festive dinner is served without wine. His opponents are *gourmets*! Indeed, Philo devotes an extraordinarily long digression to the subject of extravagant meals, which encourage license in all fields (*Cont.* 40-64). This must have been a topic of intense Jewish concern in Egypt, and Philo prides himself that the Israelite ancestor Joseph introduced the temperate kind of symposium to Egypt (*De Josepho* 201-6). I think, therefore, that we have every reason to assume that Alexandrian Jews were Philo's intended audience in his treatise on the *Therapeutae*. Unfortunately, the notion of a Roman audience resurfaces on numerous occasions in the book as an explanatory device. It is adduced, for example, to support the argument about the group's supposed antinomianism (137-8). Taylor herself asks how it is that Philo criticises the extreme allegorists for neglecting the law, while not doing so in the case of the *Therapeutae*. The reason, Taylor submits, is the different audience of each passage.

The lasting value of this book is twofold. It explores the status and activities of the *Therapeutrides* in more detail than earlier scholarship, thus reconstructing an important aspect of first-century Judaism. It also raises intriguing questions regarding the spreading of this phenomenon, which thus far cannot be answered with certainty. Beyond these issues related to women, the book is important because it reads one text of Philo against the grain and attempts to reconstruct a type of Judaism that differed in some significant respects from his own. This contributes to our understanding of the diversity of Alexandrian Judaism and may perhaps invite others to recover yet more forms of Judaism between the lines of Philo.

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Shelly Matthews, *First Converts: Rich Pagan Women and the Rhetoric of Mission in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Contraversion: Jews and Other Differences). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. 164 pp. ISBN 0 8047 3592 1.

This thin book (the text covers exactly 100 pages) is the fruit of Shelly Matthews' PhD. It is not overly ambitious, as it does not aim to cover a complete topic and leave no stone unturned. Yet its small bulk is no reflection of its quality. Matthews has framed her topic and her sources very precisely, making a decision to deal with Judaism, very early Christianity, mission and gender. Her book stands at the crossroads of all these issues. It is innovative as it applies the theory of gender as a category of analysis to a topic that has been widely researched but never viewed from this angle. With the use of gender categories Matthews takes on single handedly the entire 'new consensus' (p. 3) among prominent scholars of Judaism (such as Shaye Cohen and Martin Goodman), which maintains that Jews did not actively seek to convert their pagan neighbors. She on the other hand maintains 'that Hellenistic Judaism engaged in religious apologetics and propaganda ... and that early Christian missionary activity should be considered an extension of something already occurring in Hellenistic Judaism' (pp. 3-4).

Her methodology works as follows: in every chapter she privileges a given text (or texts) and grounds it against a historical backdrop represented by other documents that highlight specific aspects of the text she has chosen. She then subjects her text to a rhetorical analysis, accounting for the historical *Sitz-im-Leben* that produced the arguments set out by the author of the text. She ends every chapter with an attempt to flesh out the historical reality behind the rhetorical composition because of the 'insight of feminist historians that contemporary movements of liberation require historical memory of the agency of subjected people ... women in the past produced, shaped and sustained social life in general, and ... the marginality of women and subjected men in historical narratives owes to "kyriocentric" processes of composition' (pp. 7-8). In other words, in order to justify her interest in real history, Matthew feels she needs to have recourse to contemporary political concerns. As a historian myself I find this a basic flaw in feminist thinking. Why is it