

Sly (D.I.) *Philo's Alexandria*. Pp. xvii + 200; 4 maps; 9 figs. London, New York: Routledge, 1996. £35.00. ISBN: 0 415 09679 0

Roman Alexandria has been inadequately covered in modern literature, though much of the first-century CE material was used in Fraser's magisterial *Ptolemaic Alexandria* [Oxford, 1972]. As a prominent theologian (in the later tradition at least), well-versed in Classical literature, and a member of the best attested family of Alexandria, Philo offers a fascinating perspective on the city and its Jewish community. An accessible historical and biographical study of Philo or a new analysis of first-century Alexandria would, therefore, be greatly welcomed. This work is, however, a disappointment since Sly fails to present a believable picture of either the city or her major subject.

S. sets herself the task of using Philo as a guide to the city (p. 15), an interesting proposition, but fails to note that Philo's works, apart from the *In Flaccum*, make little explicit reference to Alexandria, in itself an interesting problem. S. produces entirely implausible estimates for the population density of the city, higher than modern Manhattan, Cairo and Alexandria (without allowing for the palace districts). Her treatment of the city is otherwise largely confined to brief excerpts from Philo or Strabo relating to specific buildings. Her discussion of Philo's most lengthy and interesting description of the topography of Alexandria in the *In Flaccum* is perfunctory and fails to explore adequately the obvious political tensions. The complexities of the *In Flaccum* are not discussed and S. fails even to consider issues such as audience or purpose, difficult problems for the whole Philonic corpus. The problems faced by the Jews in Alexandria and the extremely complex issue of their status with regard to Alexandrian citizenship (which must surely be crucial for a proper understanding of the relationship between Philo and Alexandria), are not properly explained and nothing new is said about these issues.

The lack of explicit references to Alexandria and Alexandrian history in Philo causes S. problems (there are possible implicit references to the environment of Alexandria that S. fails to discuss) and these are compounded by S.'s failure to marry adequately her two entirely laudable aims of writing a history of Alexandria and an intellectual biography. Large sections are almost historical fiction as S. attempts to reconstruct Philo's attitude to certain historical events or institutions even though these hardly figure in Philo's work. This is taken to extremes in a chapter on Philo's treatment of Cleopatra VII, not mentioned by Philo, and an extended discussion of Serapis and Isis, who hardly figure in the Philonic corpus. As a discussion of Alexandria, much of the work covers material discussed by Fraser and fails both to exploit major documentary,

archaeological and literary sources and to place Alexandria within the context of contemporary urban settlements in the rest of Egypt or the Mediterranean.

The work is more successful as an intellectual biography, though even here crucial areas are not explored. Philo's methodology and imagery were obviously influenced by Hellenistic culture and philosophy and S. places Philo within this Hellenistic intellectual tradition. Philo's place within Jewish thought is less clearly expounded. S. states that Philo 'spoke only Greek' (p.62), but it would seem unlikely that Philo worked solely within a Greek linguistic tradition and in complete isolation from developments in Judaea, even if he used the Septuagint as his primary Biblical text (which is often argued). Aramaic was probably spoken by some of the Jews of Alexandria and the Jewish community remained in communication with the Jews of Israel-Palestine. S. points to some similarities between Philo's thought and that reported in the *New Testament*, but these connections are too vague and generalised to prove that there was much in common other than a shared heritage. Similar images concerning salvation and light (p. 60) clearly derive from Isaiah 9.2. It would be more interesting perhaps to compare him with Josephus, a man whose intellectual development is well attested and who was similarly well versed in the Hellenistic tradition. The central issue of the 'Alexandrian nature' of Philo's thought is reduced to unconvincing and generalised assumptions about his environment and intellectual development.

There is an interesting topic in Philo's Alexandria but this work fails to provide a convincing introduction to either the cultural topography of Alexandria or the intellectual context of Philo.

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