



## THE NILE FLOOD ACCORDING TO A SECOND CENTURY BCE JUDEAN EGYPTIAN EXCERPTED TEXT

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When Alexander of Macedon conquered Egypt, he did more than assert power over the Egyptian people; he also encouraged large-scale migration to populate the land. Among the migrant groups came many Judeans,<sup>1</sup> who established communities throughout Egypt, building places of worship and engaging in the local economy. While this was not the first time Judeans had lived in Egypt, a large number of Judean texts attest to several vibrant communities deeply engaged with Hellenistic and Egyptian ideals.<sup>2</sup>

An excerpt from the writings of Artapanus from the second century BCE reveals the extent to which Judean writers engaged with both Egyptian and Greek traditions.<sup>3</sup> In his excerpt on the figure of Moses, for example, Artapanus likens Moses to numerous Egyptian and Greek deities, such as Isis, Thoth, Orpheus, and Hermes. He is also lauded as the inventor of boats, implements for war, and even the Egyptian religion (*Praep. Ev.* 9.27.4). In this brief note, I will explore one particular claim made about Moses by Artapanus, namely his role as the initiator of the Nile flood. An analysis of this claim reveals an unexplored aspect of Judean identity in Egypt, namely one intimately connected to the physical landscape of Egypt.

The reference to the Nile flood appears in Artapanus's recounting of the exodus out of Egypt, adapted from the book of Exodus. Specifically in describing the first plague, the transformation of water into blood, Artapanus interjects a reference to the annual flood. Moses stands before Pharaoh demanding the freedom of his people, and when Pharaoh refuses Moses begins taking action:

προελθόντα δὲ μικρὸν τὸν Νεῖλον τῇ ῥάβδῳ πατάξαι, τὸν δὲ ποταμὸν πολὺχουν γενόμενον κατακλύζειν ὅλην τὴν Αἴγυπτον. ἀπὸ τότε δὲ καὶ τὴν κατάβασιν αὐτοῦ γίνεσθαι. συναγαγὼν δὲ τὸ ὕδωρ ἐποζέσαι καὶ τὰ ποτάμια διαφθεῖραι ζῶα τούς τε λαοὺς διὰ τὴν δίψαν φθείρεσθαι.

Proceeding a little he [Moses] struck the Nile with the rod. The river became flooded and deluged all Egypt. From that time also its inundation<sup>4</sup> takes place. The water became stagnant and stank and destroyed the creatures that live in rivers and the people perished from thirst. (*Praep. Ev.* 9.27.28)<sup>5</sup>

Although based on the book of Exodus, the conflation between the plagues and the flood is unprecedented in Judean literature. According to the book of Exodus, the first plague transforms the river and other bodies of water into blood. In *On the Jews*, blood is not mentioned, but rather it is a flood that destroys the animals and people of Egypt.

In contrast to this destructive force, Egyptian literature describes the Nile as benevolent and positive, despite the dangers that an overly high or low flood posed to the people and its agricultural production.<sup>6</sup> For Artapanus, the floodwater that Moses initiates is not flowing, life-giving water as described in Egyptian texts, but instead it is stagnant and foul. This negative event, Artapanus tells us, continues until Moses agrees to Pharaoh's terms (that Pharaoh will release the Jews after one month if Moses restores the river) and draws in the stream again by striking the water, thereby reversing the destruction he initiated.

Yet the flood mentioned by Artapanus is also positive. In the sentence sandwiched between the descriptions of the negative flood quoted above is a claim that Moses was the one to initiate the annual flood cycles: "From that time also its inundation takes place" (ἀπὸ τότε δὲ καὶ τὴν κατάβασιν αὐτοῦ γίνεσθαι). This brief interjection suggests that Moses was seen to be responsible for the inundation, perhaps in a similar way that Isis, Osiris, or Neilos were associated with the flood.<sup>7</sup> With the flood attributed to him, Moses becomes responsible not only for the annual event but for all agricultural production in Egypt.

Analyzing Artapanus in his context of Ptolemaic and

Roman Egypt demonstrates that the Judeans did not live segregated from their cultural neighbors. Rather, they were deeply engaged in their Egyptian setting. The study of Judeans in Egypt has often focused on the diasporic nature of these communities, seeing them as a deviation from “normative” Judaism as practiced in Judea. This study suggests that this model is insufficient. The Judeans of

Egypt were deeply invested in the land of Egypt, so much so that the Nile flood, the most important feature of the Egyptian landscape, made a prominent appearance in Artapanus’s writings. To conclude, Judean identity is not based solely on religious doctrines or practices, but is informed by its cultural and physical surroundings.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Here I have followed the suggestion of Steve Mason for using the term “Judean” based on the Greek *Ioudaios* instead of Jew/Jewish (*Josephus, Judea, and Christian Origins: Methods and Categories* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 2009], 141–84).
- <sup>2</sup> Other examples of Judeans in Egypt include Abraham (Gen 12), Joseph (Gen 37–50), Israelites (Exod 1–15), and the Elephantine community in Persian Egypt.
- <sup>3</sup> The excerpts are preserved in the *Praep. Ev.* of Eusebius, who copied selections from Polyhistor’s summaries of Artapanus written in the first century BCE.
- <sup>4</sup> Howard Jacobson, “Artapanus and the Flooding of the Nile,” *The Classical Quarterly* 56 (2006): 602–603.
- <sup>5</sup> Translation adapted from John J. Collins, “Artapanus,” James L. Charlesworth (ed.), *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha 2* (Garden City, N.Y.:

Doubleday, 1985), 902.

- <sup>6</sup> Susanne Bickel, “Creative and Destructive Waters,” in A. Amenta, M. M. Luiselli, and M. N. Sordi (eds.), *L’acqua nell’antico Egitto: vita, rigenerazione, incantesimo, medicamento* (Roma: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2005), 191–200.
- <sup>7</sup> For centuries both Egyptians and Greeks developed theories on the cause of the Nile’s annual rise. The Egyptians believed that the flood came from underground springs and issued forth from the primordial Nun. The Greeks, on the other hand, developed theories involving the Etesian winds, melting snow, and the sun. Several theories also appeared in Judean texts from Roman Egypt. The *Wisdom of Solomon* mentions the underground springs theory (*Wis.* 11.6), whereas Philo of Alexandria explains that the winds were involved in raising the height of the waters (*Mos.*, 1.115).