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KEY TEXT

Jews on the Move: Catherine Hezser's *Jewish Travel in Antiquity*

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Abstract

As part of NTT JTSR's series on Key Texts, the present article discusses Catherine Hezser's monograph *Jewish Travel in Antiquity* (2011). We demonstrate that Hezser's work has been groundbreaking in its challenge of the predominantly sedentary characterisation of Jews in much of previous scholarship. In reaction to this image of Jews in the first five centuries of the common era, Hezser shows that travel played an extensive role in late-antique Jewish life. Hezser argues, for instance, that the travels of rabbis were a pivotal factor in the development of the social structure of the rabbinic movement. Notwithstanding the innovative nature of Hezser's argument, her focus on the rabbinic movement means that her discussion of pre-rabbinic Jewish material tends to remain somewhat superficial. What is more, Hezser's historicising reading of the rabbinic material can be challenged on the ground of the different genres and literary formulations represented in the rabbinic writings. In short, therefore, Hezser's work has been instrumental in placing Jewish travel solidly on the scholarly agenda, but it has not provided the final word on the topic.

Keywords: travel, rabbinic literature, Hellenistic Jewish literature, Mediterranean, Roman Empire, parables

The theme of travel recurs repeatedly in this thematic issue. Almost without exception, the eyewitnesses that feature in ancient literature – Jewish, Christian, or other – were travellers. It seems fitting, therefore, to discuss in this short contribution a monograph which has been highly influential in the study of ancient Jewish travel: Catherine Hezser's *Jewish Travel in Antiquity*.¹ In spite of its fairly recent date, Hezser's book broached the niche of the study of travel in ancient and rabbinic Judaism and inspired most later work on the topic. For that reason, it deserves to be highlighted here.

When the British Association of Jewish Studies picked 'Jews on the Move' as the theme of its 2017 conference,² it made little mention of the fact that this theme, in spite of modern preoccupations with travel and mobility, has long been far from self-evident. Michael Rostovtzeff, in his *Caravan Cities*, had contrasted Jewish immobility with Arab mobility, arguing that 'Mohammed's Arabs acquired those characteristics which enabled them to create a worldwide religion and a world-wide empire', whereas the Jews 'were from the first too closely bound to one country, and of a national character insufficiently mobile or versatile'.³ These words reflect a dominant stereotype of ancient Judaism, which has long affected the position of Jews in studies on ancient travel. Until a decade ago, these studies tended to focus on Christian pilgrimage; travel amongst non-Christian inhabitants of the Roman Empire; the material aspects of ancient travel; or a combination of these foci.⁴ Notwithstanding certain specific exceptions – e.g. Jewish pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple and exchanges in rabbinic Judaism between Israel and Babylon – travelling Jews were absent from explorations of travel in the ancient world.⁵ On the one hand, these exceptions show that some particular aspects of ancient Jewish mobility were known before Hezser wrote her book; on the other, however, they demonstrate that both a book-length study of Jewish travel experiences and a sustained integration

1 C. Hezser, *Jewish Travel in Antiquity* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 144), Tübingen 2011.

2 See https://www.eurojewishstudies.org/cgp/conference-grant-programme-reports/bajs_conference_2017_jews_on_the_move/, accessed 23rd of March 2021.

3 M. Rostovtzeff, *Caravan Cities*, Oxford 1932, 52-53, also quoted by Hezser, *Jewish Travel*, 1.

4 Surveys of pre-2011 scholarly work on ancient travel are available: Hezser, *Jewish Travel*, 4-10; M.R. Niehoff, 'Journeys on the Way to This Volume', in M.R. Niehoff (ed.), *Journeys in the Roman East: Imagined and Real* (Culture, Religion, and Politics in the Greco-Roman World 1), Tübingen 2017, 1-20.

5 On these exceptions, see Hezser, *Jewish Travel*, 10-16.

of Jewish mobility into the study of travel and mobility in the Hellenistic and Roman periods remained a desideratum.

With a total of 529 pages, Hezser's work provides the only extensive monograph on ancient Jewish travel to date. As such, it stands out for challenging the dominant image of ancient Jews as a sedentary and national group by pointing to the centrality of travel and mobility for all inhabitants of the Roman Empire, Jews included. Drawing on the assumption that '[a]ncient Jewish immobility would stand at odds with the increased mobility of the inhabitants of the Roman and Byzantine empires in the first five centuries CE',⁶ Hezser examines Jewish sources from this time period – with a clear focus on rabbinic literature – to demonstrate how Jews journeyed across the Roman Empire and represented their travels in the literature they produced.

Travel and rabbinic networks

Jewish Travel in Antiquity is divided in two parts. The first part treats 'the material basis' of travel, such as roads, hostels, and the means of land and sea travel. In this part, Hezser shows that travelling Jews made ample use of the Roman infrastructure, including the *cursus publicus*. At the same time, Jewish travellers would avoid places that could bring them in conflicting situations. Public hostels, for instance, did not generally allow for separate sleeping facilities for men and women and were at times associated with fornication. Instead of spending the night in these public places, therefore, rabbis on the move would prefer to be hosted by fellow rabbis. As a result, a particularly Jewish infrastructure developed alongside the common infrastructure of the Roman Empire.⁷

The second part of Hezser's book deals with 'the literary representation of travel' in Jewish literature, including Jewish pilgrimage, travel *halakhah*, and the connection between travel and trade. Hezser notably devotes a separate section to the mobility of Jewish women, concluding that both the mobility of these women and its literary representation in the sources were under male control.⁸

6 Hezser, *Jewish Travel*, 1.

7 Hezser, *Jewish Travel*, 89–119.

8 Hezser, *Jewish Travel*, 389–408.

A conspicuous feature of Hezser's work is its focus on the land of Israel – whence most sources from the first five centuries CE stem – and on rabbinic literature – the largest corpus of such sources.⁹ In her earlier work *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine*,¹⁰ Hezser had argued against the static character of rabbinic Judaism and shown that rabbis were continuously on the move, both within the land of Israel and between Israel and Babylon. Rather than a unified movement, then, rabbinic Judaism consisted of a range of rabbinic networks in which individual rabbis upheld contacts with one another through travel. In many regards, *Jewish Travel in Antiquity* builds on Hezser's earlier work, showing how rabbis travelled and how rabbinic literature represents these journeys. Hence, the book underscores Hezser's view of the rabbinic movement as a grass-roots phenomenon held together by 'an informal network of relationships'.¹¹

A side effect of Hezser's rabbinic focus is that her treatment of other ancient Jewish literature on travel often remains somewhat preliminary. Whilst certain topics pertinent to rabbinic Judaism – such as travel *halakah* or journeys between Israel and Babylonia – take centre stage in Hezser's analyses, other themes – such as the ample and intricate relationships between Israel and Egypt testified in the Letter of Aristeas, Philo, Josephus, and the New Testament – are mentioned but receive less attention. As a result, Hezser's discussion of rabbinic travel bolsters her overall argument on the character of the rabbinic movement, but her treatments of travel in other Jewish sources, many of them written in Greek, rarely make it into larger arguments on the character of pre- and extra-rabbinic groups or individuals.

'Historical' vs fictive stories

In her discussion of rabbinic travel stories, as in general, Hezser tends to have a historicising take on narratives. This holds for accounts that are presented as 'realistic', such as in the genre of the *maaseh*, or stories that even the rabbis did not intend to be historical, such as *meshalim*, parables. This is particularly evident in the section on rabbinic literature in the chapter

9 Hezser, *Jewish Travel*, 3: 'The focus will (...) be on the Land of Israel (...) and on rabbis, from whose perspective the majority of the literary sources of the first five centuries CE are formulated.'

10 C. Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 66), Tübingen 1997.

11 Hezser, *Social Structure*, 228-39.

on 'Travel in Ancient Jewish Narrative Tradition'.¹² Starting with the *maasim*, of which she discusses several examples, Hezser claims that the stories 'obviously cannot be taken at face value' (214). Yet she draws historical conclusions from the stereotypical introduction 'Rabbi xx was walking on the way' or variants thereof. This formula is rife in all rabbinic sources and found to introduce halakhic discussions, but also in accounts about meetings with 'others', notably Samaritans, heretics and gentiles. Not mentioned by Hezser is that this formula is also used in parables – deliberately fictive stories, where it sets the stage for a story that is meant to illustrate a biblical verse or event. An example is the *mashal* of the father and his son who were 'walking on the way' when they successively meet a wolf and robbers.¹³ Because the formula is used in all kinds of literary settings, halakhic as well as haggadic, fiction as well as non-fiction, its historiographical value should be questioned. Admittedly, even parables use images that the intended audience can relate to, otherwise they would not be able to get the message, but this is a far step from giving historical information about, for example in this case, robbers terrorising the roads in Palestine. The fact that many parables deal with kings is the best proof that they are not historically reliable, as there have never been Jewish kings in the rabbinic world that produced these parables. Yet everyone can relate to a story about a king, just as we can still relate to fairy tales about princes on white horses whereas most people have never met one. In addition, and important in this context, is that similar stories are known from the Graeco-Roman world in the form of fables.¹⁴

When parables are mentioned, on the other hand, they are interspersed in a section that mainly deals with halakhic sources, without explicit differentiation between the genres. This is the case in the example of Eleazar ben Azariah who is called a 'pedlar's basket' by Yohanan ben Zakkai (thus

12 Hezser, *Jewish Travel*, 213-84.

13 E.g., in *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael Beshalach to Exod 14:19*; *Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai to the same verse*; *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael Bachodesh to Exod 19:4*. See L.M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilot: An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 176), Tübingen 2019, 167-77.

14 E.g. Aesop's Fable of the Murderer. See L. Gibbs, *Aesop's Fables: A New Translation*, Oxford 2002, 87. See also <http://mythfolklore.net/aesopica/perry/32.htm>, accessed 23rd of March 2021. About the relationship between this fable and the rabbinic parable see L.M. Teugels, 'From the Lion to the Snake, from the Wolf to the Bear: Rescue and Punishment in Classical Fables and Rabbinic Meshalim', in A. Oegema, M. Stoutjesdijk, J. Pater (ed.), *Parables and Fables in the Graeco-Roman World* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament), Tübingen forthcoming.

far the account is meant to be historical), which is then illustrated by a parable about a pedlar who travels from town to town with a basket (a story that is meant to be fictive).¹⁵ This is not to say that Hezser is not aware of the difference between fictive and non-fictive genres, and of the fact that both should be taken *cum grano salis* when it comes to deriving historical information. More explicit attention to the differences between the genres and their claim to reality would, however, be warranted.

Legacy and influence

Notwithstanding the points of criticism raised above, the importance of Hezser's work, apart from its characterisation of rabbinic Judaism as a constellation of rabbinic networks, lies in its demonstration of the central role that travel and mobility played in the lives of Jews in the first five centuries of the common era. This triggered investigations of these topics in sources on which Hezser touched, but which she did not subject to a full analysis. Recent years have seen studies of travel in authors such as Philo or Josephus,¹⁶ as well as sustained studies of pre-rabbinic Jewish networks that connected the land of Israel with Egypt and Babylon.¹⁷ These networks facilitated the transmission of knowledge between Jews and non-Jews in these localities; thus, the increased attention to Jewish travel has also given new impetus to the study of Jewish cosmopolitanism and the interaction between Jews and others in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods.

On a broader level, Hezser's work calls for the integration of Jewish travel in the study of travel, migration, and mobility in the ancient world. Although

15 Hezser, *Jewish Travel* 230 about ARNA 18:1.

16 R. Bloch, *Andromeda in Ja fa: Mythische Orte als Reiseziele in der jüdischen Antike* (Franz Delitzsch-Vorlesung 2015), Münster 2017; S. Adams, 'Movement and Travel in Philo's Migration of Abraham: The Adaptation of Genesis and the Introduction of Metaphor', *The Studia Philonica Annals* 30 (2018), 47-70; P.B. Hartog, 'Space and Travel in Philo's *Legatio ad Gaium*', *The Studia Philonica Annals* 30 (2018), 71-92.

17 M. Popović, 'Networks of Scholars: The Transmission of Astronomical and Astrological Learning between Babylonians, Greeks and Jews', in J. Ben-Dov, S. Sanders (ed.), *Ancient Jewish Sciences and the History of Knowledge* (New York 2013), 151-91; S. Honigman, 'Intercultural Exchanges in the Hellenistic East: The Respective Roles of Temples, Royal Offices, Courts, and Gymnasias', in E. Ben Zvi, C. Levin (ed.), *Centers and Peripheries in the Early Second Temple Period* (Tübingen 2016), 49-78; P.B. Hartog, *Peshar and Hypomnema: A Comparison of Two Commentary Traditions from the Hellenistic-Roman Period* (Texts of the Desert of Judah 121), Leiden 2017, 16-28.

