Theodotus’ *On the Jews* in Context

Theodotus’ *On the Jews* (Περὶ ᾽Ιουδαίων) (*SH* 757-64), surviving in only 47 lines spread across 8 fragments, is a little-known and even less-understood hexameter poem, probably dating from the 2nd century B.C.E. The work describes a handful of events in the life of the patriarch Jacob, including the rape of his daughter Dinah and the sack of Shechem as recounted in *Genesis* 33.18-34.29. Historians have attempted to tie the poem to the actual destruction of Shechem in *ca*. 107 B.C.E., to link it to contemporary Jewish politics, and to determine Theodotus’ personal religious affiliation (e.g., Bull 1967; Collins 1980; Gruen 1998: 120-25). But a better understanding of and appreciation for Theodotus’ poem requires analysis of how it makes use of contemporary Hellenistic literary ideas, images, and principles. This paper will build on the small body of work on the literary aspects of the poem and suggest new connections and generic associations.

The poem’s supposed genre, title, and diction have received the most attention. Alan Cameron categorized Theodotus’ *On the Jews* as an “ethnic epic” (1995: 301)—an unclear designation which casts little light on the poem’s genre. Felix Jacoby suggested an alternative title for the poem, Σικίμων κτίσις (*The Foundation of Shechem*) (1958: 692), because it briefly describes the history of the city. The poem’s careful use of Homeric and Hellenistic vocabulary has been amply catalogued (cf. Holladay 1989: 72-3).

Yet Theodotus’ *On the Jews* has many important generic and compositional connections to other Hellenistic poems which have gone unnoticed or unstated. Theodotus’ focus, for example, on the origin of circumcision is an aetiology which would have had broad appeal to the Hellenistic imagination because of its ethnographic focus. Similarly, in *Genesis* 34.1, Jacob’s daughter Dinah is raped when she goes out to meet with neighboring women, while in Theodotus’ version, the violation occurs when she visits the city of Shechem in order to attend a festival. Foreign, lower-class women who visit a city for a festival are at the center of the action in Theocritus’ *Idyll* 15, and the dangers of festivals are important themes in Callimachus’ Acontius and Cydippe episode (frr. 67-75 Pfeiffer) and Apollonius’ *Foundation of Naucratis* (*CA* 7-9). And just as Callimachus’ *Hecale* culminates in Theseus’ defeat of the Marathonian bull, so too Theodotus’ poem seems to focus on a single event, namely the overthrow of Shechem by Jacob’s aggressive sons. From these comparisons, it emerges that Theodotus’ *On the Jews* can be categorized as a Hellenistic epyllion, a genre which commonly exhibits interest in aetiologies and local histories, a single major action, martial valor, generational conflict, and erotic motivation. There are so many similarities, in fact, that I argue the poem must have been composed with that set of literary conventions in mind.

A reading of Theodotus’ *On the Jews* alongside contemporary poetic parallels therefore results in an increased appreciation for the poem and better understanding of it as Hellenistic literature. Moreover, focus on the poem’s aspects which point to it as being similar to Hellenistic epyllia may help to answer a crucial question, which dates back to the 19th century, of whether the poem was small in scope and has been wrongly titled by the ancient authors who transmit its fragments—for the title *On the Jews* promises much more than the fragments deliver—or that this title is correct and much of the poem has been lost.

Works Cited

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