
Rosetta

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Reviewed by Joseph Scales.

Ze'ev Safrai's *Seeking out the Land* is a comprehensive exploration of a vast number of texts which concern the "Land of Israel." These texts are drawn from the body of Jewish, Christian and Samaritan literature written between the 2nd century BCE and the 4th century CE. The book is divided into eight chapters, prefaced by a short introduction. Safrai examines passages that address the concept of the land itself, but also texts which deal with particular places in the land. These latter texts are included if they demonstrate a larger ideology of the land being holy, or special in some way. This review will cover the principal contents of each of the chapters before offering some evaluative critiques of Safrai's work as a whole.

Chapter one covers late Second Temple period Jewish texts (dated from around 200 BCE to 70 CE). These include the books of Jubilees, the Maccabees, the Letter of Aristeas, the Septuagint, the Genesis Apocryphon, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Qumran library (Dead Sea Scrolls) and the works of Philo. This chapter discusses a large number of passages, but the quantity of material means that much of the analysis is brief. Safrai presents the texts directly and draws only lightly on academic research.

The second chapter presents the works of Josephus, who had a detailed knowledge of the land and provided many historical place details. Safrai divides Josephus' geography into descriptions of places contemporary to his activities and attempts at identifying biblical sites. Much of Safrai's focus is on Josephus' "accuracy," presupposing that there is some physical idea of the land "out there." Here it can be seen that Safrai treats the "Land of Israel" as a self-evident description throughout the book.

Chapter three discusses the sanctity of the land in halakhic rabbinic texts. The rabbinic literature is primarily concerned with how to properly observe the law in the land, but also with the sanctity of the land, its praiseworthiness and identifications of biblical sites. Jerusalem is discussed as a site of particular importance. The land tends to be further and further praised while the prominence of Jerusalem is negated over time after the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

The fourth chapter opens with a brief history of scholarship on the geography of the "Land of Israel." Safrai takes stock of the ancient Jewish ideology of the land, noting the importance of Jerusalem and two important turning points in the history of thought: the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, and the end of the Bar Kokhba Revolt in 135 CE, when the Jews were banished from Jerusalem.

Chapter five considers early Christian literature, beginning with the New Testament before discussing at length the geographies of the Church Fathers and the works of such figures as Eusebius and Jerome. Eusebius' *Onomasticon* is given lengthy treatment. The land was

discussed by the early Christians in terms of biblical geography, the locations of the Christian communities, secular geography, and geographical expositions.

The sixth chapter details the few Samaritan works which address the topic of the land, and also Mount Gerizim, the Samaritan holy mountain. Generally, Samaritan literature “expresses extremely limited concern with all the Land.” Only passages in the Samaritan Chronicle and on the allocation of the territory of the tribes of Israel discuss the land at length.

Chapter seven presents an account of sacred Jewish and Christian sites in the land (the Samaritan literature only really discusses Gerizim at length). Safrai’s criteria for including sites in this chapter include: sacredness of the site; association with an important historical event; association with a holy person or people. There is little discussion of what sacredness entails; for Safrai, sites are sacred because they are believed to be sacred. Tombs are also discussed in detail, particularly the alleged tombs of biblical figures. Details of Christian sacred sites are drawn from literature of the 4th-5th centuries CE. Safrai also gives an account of the process of institutionalization for sacred tombs and other sites.

The final chapter concludes the work, summarizing the key findings. The Bar Kokhba Revolt was a key turning point in the ideology of the “Land of Israel.” In Judaism, Jerusalem became decentred, while the land took on a greater significance. Samaritan literature remained focussed on the importance of Mount Gerizim throughout this period. The Christians held generally negative attitudes towards Jerusalem and the temple. The land only became important during the post-Constantinian rise of Christianity, when Christians began to venerate sites there, the land being seen as the contextual landscape of an increasing number of sacred sites.

Throughout the work, Safrai appears to define the “Land of Israel” as a strip of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea in the Levant. This presupposes a “reality” of the land which exists outside of texts or ideologies. Safrai’s loose terminology is helpful, as it allows his analysis to explore texts which, in themselves, have no clear designations for “the land” but have a concept of a place which could be called the “Land of Israel.” The weakness of this approach, however, can be seen when one considers the vast body of literature which address space and place beyond physical descriptions. Safrai’s concern is frequently a text’s familiarity with the physicality of the region, which prioritizes accuracy over ideological conceptions. Any mention of particular places which Safrai knows *a priori* to be in the land become cyphers for a text’s ideology of the land. For example, Safrai argues that Philo has a conception of the land being holy, because the city of Jamnia could be desecrated. Safrai further makes great effort to identify certain settlements mentioned in Second Temple period Jewish texts with places mentioned in the bible. This is often the purview of many “biblical geographers” both ancient and modern, but it has led Safrai to argue that some ancient authors did not have a familiarity with the “land of Israel” as their geographical descriptions are not “accurate.”

A further issue for readers to note is that Safrai engages mostly with primary sources. As such, there is less discussion of relevant academic literature than might be desired. While

Safrai's bibliography has a great many important works on the subject (especially scholarship in Hebrew) and key texts of the book, there is little in the way of recent scholarship of these texts.

Aside from these weaknesses, this book functions as an excellent source for the topic of the land, discussion of the role of Jerusalem (and Mount Gerizim in Samaritan literature), and important sacred sites in the land. There are a number of detailed maps and diagrams which contain wealthy deposits of information. Students and scholars working in biblical reception history, late Second Temple Jewish literature, Jewish literature of the tannaitic and amoraic periods, early Christian literature, Samaritan literature and the history of the Christianization of Palestine will all find something of interest in this volume. This work could become a standard source-book on the subject of the "Land of Israel" in the literature of the 2nd century BCE to the 4th century CE.