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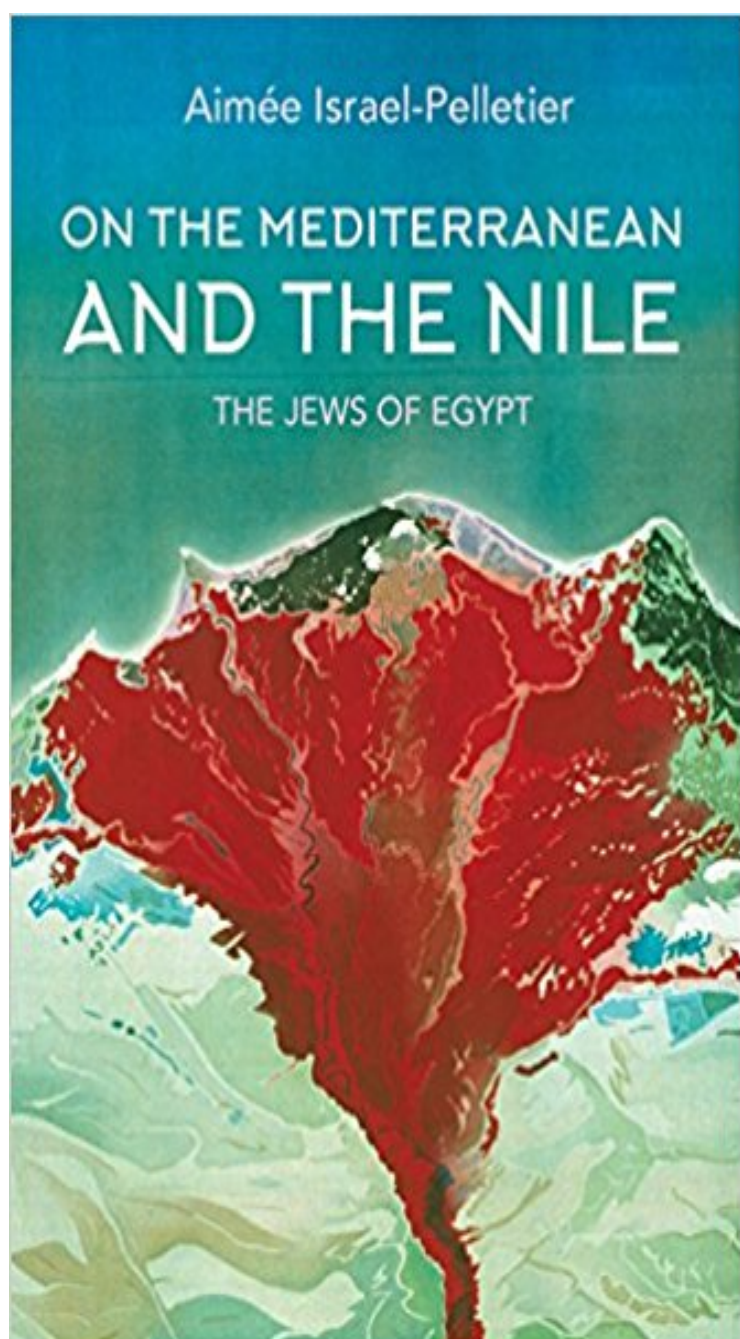
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On the Mediterranean and the Nile

The Jews of Egypt



Aimée Israel-Pelletier

Indiana Series in Sephardi and Mizrahi Studies

Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, March 2018. 288 pages. \$30.00. Paperback. ISBN 9780253031921.

Review

In the late 1940s, the Jews of Egypt—a country whose significance for Judaism goes back to the Pharaonic times and the biblical Exodus—constituted a community of around eighty thousand people, living mainly in Cairo and Alexandria and made up of families that had mostly arrived there in the course of the 19th century from all over the Mediterranean and southeastern Europe. During the colonial and monarchic periods, Jews contributed greatly to the modernization of Egypt, and even though many never acquired Egyptian nationality, they still felt that Egypt was their homeland, developing profound feelings of belonging to the land that extends along the Mediterranean and the Nile. Unlike most works published on the subject so far, Aimée Israel-Pelletier has chosen to discuss the Jews of Egypt not from a historiographical perspective, but from the point of view of literary studies. She selected five renowned writers as the point of departure for uncovering aspects of the (post-migratory) identity and cultural memory of the Jews of Egypt.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter deals with the psychoanalyst and essayist Jacques Hassoun, particularly his writings on the condition of the immigrant, the stranger, and the mother-tongue. Israel-Pelletier then moves to Jacqueline Kahanoff, who emigrated to Israel in the 1950s, introducing her works—first the novel *Jacob's Ladder*—and then looking at the notion of the Levant. Edmond Jabès is the focus of the third chapter, which also investigates the centrality of French and Francophilia in Egypt's intellectual life in the first half of the 20th century. The fourth chapter provides an analysis of the novels of Paula Jacques. Lastly, the fifth chapter focuses on the autobiographical novel *Out of Egypt* and other essays by André Aciman. These last two authors belong to a generation younger than those analyzed in the previous chapters.

Altogether, the book provides an interesting portrayal of the literary and autobiographical writings published by the Jews of Egypt since they left that country in the 1950s and 1960s. Based upon her background as a literary scholar, Israel-Pelletier opts for a close textual reading and gives a meticulous description of the plot of the books and of specific scenes. This approach, however, does not always allow one to see the larger picture that lies beneath what is described. In relation to that, it would have been useful, for example, to provide more information on Egyptian Jewish writers not discussed in the book—which actually focuses only on Francophone and Anglophone authors—and on contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi literature more generally. I am thinking particularly of well-known Israeli authors of Egyptian origin like Ronit Matalon, Yitzhaq Gormezano Goren, and Orly Castel-Bloom who write in Hebrew (Israel being home to the largest population of members of the Egyptian Jewish diaspora), as well as of Italian-speaking ones such as Paolo Terni and Daniel Fishman.

The most interesting chapters are those dedicated to Jacques Hassoun and Jacqueline Kahanoff. There, Israel-Pelletier gives a nuanced reading of the notion of the Levant and of Levantine identity as “an aesthetics, a way of doing things” (96). Kahanoff and Hassoun are rightly presented as eminent intellectuals that deserve more attention and whose reflections on exile and Jewishness still have relevance today. The author carefully sheds light on the profound—and in some cases almost invisible—imprint that Egypt left on the writings of these authors, themselves part of a wider Mediterranean (Jewish) diaspora in which one finds personalities like Abdelwahab Meddeb, Albert Memmi, Jacques Derrida, and Albert Camus, to cite only a few names. Finally, Israel-Pelletier discusses the idea of Egypt as a foundational *lieu* in Jewish history and Judaism, pointing to the religious and ethno-cultural short-circuits between the biblical Exodus and the so-called “Second Exodus” that the Jews of Egypt went through in the 1950s. This is best exemplified by the peculiar meanings attached to the Passover *seder* (an annual ritual meal during which the Exodus from Egypt is commemorated) has for those Jews who personally experienced living in that country, albeit in modern times. Israel-Pelletier concludes that for them, “Egypt had been, all along, nothing more than a living proof of the Jewish condition of eternal exile,” as well as “a real place, one that figures a home that is lost” (204). This is what, in her view, distinguishes the Jews of Egypt from all other Jews, and what makes their story somehow special and worth telling.

With *On the Mediterranean and the Nile*, Israel-Pelletier has paid homage to a bygone—but never entirely forgotten—Egypt, and to at least two generations of writers, whose literary works on the one hand reveal a little-known side of the Egyptian past, and on the other help us understand the fascinating web of feelings and images that continues to bind together memory, nationhood, and Jewishness in and beyond the Mediterranean.

About the Reviewer(s):

Dario Miccoli is Lecturer of Modern Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Ca' Foscari University, Venice. He is the author of *Histories of the Jews of Egypt: An Imagined Bourgeoisie, 1880s-1950s* (Routledge, 2015) and, more recently, the editor of *Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature* (Routledge, 2017), and *Homelands and Diasporas: Perspectives on Jewish Culture in the Mediterranean and Beyond* (with Marcella Simoni and Giorgia Foscari, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

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About the Author(s)/Editor(s)/Translator(s):

Aimée Israel-Pelletier is Professor and Head of French at the University of Texas at Arlington. She is author of *Rimbaud's Impressionist Poetics: Vision and Visuality*.

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