The Disappearing God in Ezekiel the Tragedian

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Eusebius of Caesarea was, thankfully, nothing if not industrious. As he began Book 9 of his Praeparatio Evangelica, Eusebius promised to show that “the most illustrious of the Greeks” knew about the Israelites (9.1.1). To this end he frequently quotes Alexander Polyhistor (“very learned”; 9.17.1) who had flourished in the middle of the first century BCE and collected writings of the Jews in Greek. Among those excerpted by Alexander and quoted by Eusebius was Ezekiel the Tragedian. Ezekiel is otherwise known from Clement of Alexandria (Strom. 1.23.155.1–5), where he is said to be the composer of Jewish tragedies (ὁ τῶν Ἰουδαικῶν τραγῳδιῶν ποιητὴς). Clement quotes the same opening scene of Ezekiel the Tragedian as does Alexander. Ezekiel’s description of a strange bird is also found in Ps.-Eustatius (PG 18.729), where it is identified as a phoenix. But it is to Eusebius that we owe the large collection of fragments of the work of Ezekiel.

The title of Ezekiel’s work is Ἐξαγωγή, “The Leading Out” (Praep. ev. 9.28.12; Clement, Strom. 1.23.155.1), an appropriate title for the Exodus from Egypt.1 Although we have only fragments, the structure of the play is usually seen as consisting of five acts:

1. Moses’s opening monologue and his meeting with the daughters of Raguel.
3. The burning bush.
4. The messenger’s speech telling of the crossing of the Red Sea and the destruction of the Egyptians.
5. The report of a scout about Elim and a strange bird.2

Many questions surround the fascinating work of Ezekiel the Tragedian. Was this work, so consciously composed using the metres of the classical

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1 Philo uses this term for the book of Exodus at Migr. Abr. 14; Quis Heres 251.
playwrights, 3 meant to be performed? 4 If so, where? And what would that mean for the place and educational level of Jews living in Alexandria, where it was most likely composed? Even if not meant to be performed, as it does not follow the Aristotelian requirement for unity of time and place, the work would still require a sophisticated audience.

1 The Dream of Moses

Apart from these considerations, the work contains a puzzle that continues to mystify scholars. One particularly teasing feature is the dream that Moses has before he encounters the burning bush and is commissioned by God to return to Egypt to rescue the Hebrews: 5

I dreamt there was on the summit of mount Sinai 6
A certain great throne extending up to heaven's cleft,
On which there sat a certain noble man
Wearing a crown and holding a great sceptre
In his left hand. With his right hand
He beckoned to me, and I stood before the throne.
He gave me the sceptre and told me to sit
On the great throne. He gave me the royal crown
And he himself left the throne.
I beheld the entire circled earth
Both beneath the earth and above the heaven
And a host of stars fell on its knees before me;
I numbered them all,
They passed before me like a squadron of soldiers.

Many of the motifs in the dream have parallels. When Micaiah begins to tell his true prophecy of what will happen to King Ahab, he begins, “I saw the Lord

4 See the discussion in Holladay, Fragments, 314–16.
5 The translation follows Holladay, Fragments, 362–65.
6 The manuscript here reads ἴνου, which has been emended to Σιναίου. Jacobson (Exagoge, 199–200 n. 2) prefers to read σιναῖον “lofty.” Holladay (Fragments, 439–440 n. 72) defends the reading of Sinai.