



**STEVE MASON, JOSEPHUS, JUDEA, AND CHRISTIAN
ORIGINS: METHODS AND CATEGORIES,
HENDRICKSON, PEABODY, MASS. 2009 (XX AND 443
PP.; ISBN 9781598562545)**

The book under review is a collection of papers (most of which have already been published elsewhere) by Steve Mason, an eminent specialist on Josephus and editor-in-chief of the latest English translation and comprehensive commentary on all Josephus' writings by the Brill Publishing House.¹

The publication contains eleven chapters divided into three main parts; the first is devoted to the interpretation and historical use of Josephus, the second part deals with the Judean society in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and the third looks at some aspects of the Christian origin. As the subtitle suggests, the concern for methodology and appropriate categories is a prominent feature of this publication, running throughout the whole book, and many times Mason's points have to be acknowledged as an important voice in the modern scholarly discussion. Indeed, Mason's views on the use of Josephus as a historical source will be of special interest to us here. His ideas in this respect are very worthy of consideration because he is perhaps the most provocative disputant in the recent methodological exchange on Josephus and the history of

¹ So far only the first ten books of *Judean Antiquities*, and the second book of *Judean War*, have been published. They are as follows: *Antiquitates Iudaicae: Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, vol. 3, *Judean Antiquities 1–4*, trans. and comm. by L.H. Feldman, Brill 2000; *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, vol. 4, *Judean Antiquities 5–7*, trans. and comm. by C.T. Begg, Brill, 2005; *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, vol. 5: *Judean Antiquities 8–10*, trans. and comm. by C.T. Begg and P. Spilsbury, Brill 2005; *Bellum Iudaicum: Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, vol. 1B, *Judean War 2*, transl. and comment. by S. Mason; Brill 2008. Additionally, the editions of *Vita* and *Contra Apionem* have been completed and include the following: *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, vol. 9, *Life of Josephus*, transl. and comment. by S. Mason, Brill 2001; *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, vol. 10, *Against Apion*, transl. and comment. by J.M.G. Barclay, Brill 2007.

Roman Judea.² Clearly, Mason belongs to, and even leads, the camp of those who, generally speaking, call into question the value of Josephus' writings as a historical source. In the other camp we should distinguish Daniel. R. Schwartz and Lester L. Grabbe in the first place who, acknowledging the value of composition criticism and studies on Josephus' narratives as artistic products, still opt for a far-reaching use of Josephus as a historical source.

Except for methodological issues on the use of Josephus as "a window to real events" (p. 42), part 1 also contains chapters 2 and 3, which present the essence of Mason's positive approach towards Josephus. Namely, he treats Josephus' writings as artistic narratives, that is as "efforts at communication with real audiences" (p. 2). In the case of Josephus, Flavian Rome is the background against which his writings have to be interpreted. Consequently, although there were some Judeans in his company, it was primarily a non-Judean audience – the Greeks and the Romans – to whom Josephus addresses his writings. The process of production of Josephus' texts consisted of both oral recitation and distribution of partial drafts. Thus, the process was focused on a relatively small group of Josephus' closest company. Consequently, it is erroneous to see Josephus as consciously addressing large groups of people (the Diaspora Jews or the Jews in Yavne) as previous scholarship frequently assumed. In this context, much of Josephus' flattery towards the Flavian house (e.g. Titus' clemency) can be understood ironically, as Mason shows in chapter 3.

The second part (chapters 5–8) deals with three specific phenomena of 1st-c. CE Judea – the Ioudaioi, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. First, chapter 5 makes the case that the ancient Ioudaioi cannot be regarded as members of a religious group, because the notion of "religion" as a comprehensive system of practices and beliefs did not exist in the ancient Mediterranean world (at least not until ca. 200 CE). Instead, the Ioudaioi are to be understood as an ethnos, a people associated with a place and its essential customs. Consequently, Mason suggests that the most appropriate English term for the Greek Iudaios is "Judean" and not

² D.R. Schwartz, *Agrippa I. The Last King of Judea*, Tübingen 1990; D.R. Schwartz, 'Josephus and Nicolaus on the Pharisees' *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 14, 1983, 157–171; S. Mason, 'Contradiction or Counterpoint? Josephus and Historical Method' *Review of Rabbinic Literature* 6, 2003, 145–188 (reacting to Schwartz 1983 and Schwartz 1990); D.R. Schwartz, 'Composition and Sources in Antiquities 18. The Case of Pontius Pilate' in Z. Rodgers (ed.) *Making History: Josephus and Historical Method*, Leiden 2007, 125–146 (reacting to Mason 2003); L.L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian: vol. 1: Persian and Greek Periods, vol. 2: Roman Period*, Minneapolis 1992; S. Mason, 'Method in the Study of Early Judaism: A Dialogue with Lester Grabbe' *Journal of American Oriental Society* 115, 1995, 463–472 (reacting to Grabbe 1992); L.L. Grabbe, 'The Pharisees. A Response to S. Mason' in A.J. Avery-Peck, J. Neusner, *Judaism in Late Antiquity. Part 3, Vol. 3, Where We Stand: Issues and Debates in Ancient Judaism*, Leiden 2000, 35–47 (reacting to Mason 1995).

“Jewish”. Chapters 6 and 7 analyze Josephus’ presentation of the Pharisees and conclude that, despite a common knowledge in scholarship, the Pharisees were not of special interest to Josephus; on the contrary, they play only a supporting role in Josephus’ narratives. Likewise, in chapter 8 Mason shows that Josephus’ account on the Essenes is a highly stylized passage composed in order to appeal to the tastes of his Roman audience (the Essenes are a utopian, Spartan-like community). As a result, he suggests that the Essenes so described by Josephus have nothing in common with the authors of the sectarian documents within the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The third part comprises chapters 9–11. In chapters 9 and 10 Mason surveys the early-Christian use of the term “gospel” (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) and suggests that it was only the third generation of Christians who started to understand this term as a common basis (the message that has been proclaimed by the early church) between a writer and his readers. According to Mason, it was Paul who first coined this term, but understood it as referring only to his unique mission towards non-Jews. Additionally, in chapter 10 Mason comes up with the rather unusual suggestion that the primary audience of the Letter to the Romans was Judean-Christian. Next, in chapter 11 he examines the presentation of various groups of the Judean establishment before 70 CE: the Sanhedrin, the chief priests, the Sadducees and Pharisees) in Luke-Acts (as one two-volume work) and then compares it with Josephus’ testimony. As a result, Mason lists both discrepancies (Josephus himself is a proud member of the Jerusalem aristocracy, while the Christian tradition is very critical towards it) and substantial agreements between Luke-Acts and Josephus. In short, both textual traditions agree that, firstly, the high priests and the Sanhedrin had supreme control of national affairs; secondly, the Sadducees, in contrast to the Pharisees, rejected the idea of life after death and post-biblical developments in demonology and angelology; thirdly, the Pharisees occupied the middle ground between the establishment and common people who in turn regarded the Pharisees as authorized teachers; however, in the face of charismatic leaders and revolts even the hold of the Pharisees over the masses turned out to be limited.

Back onto Mason’s methodological views on Josephus’ writings as historical sources. These are most precisely explained in chapters 1 and 4 of part 1. Mason presents his position by both expressing his general convictions and focusing on detail (in analyzing chosen passages and becoming involved in polemics with other scholars). He first declares that the ancient sense of history-writing essentially departed from the modern one (p. 7–15). According to him, ancient notions of truthfulness, precision and probability in history-writing were rhetorical and moral categories, and had nothing to do with, as he puts it, empirical concerns. Thus, the opposite of truth was not simple factual

error for which an ancient historian could be criticized (since something had not really happened in a way he presented), but bias. Furthermore, Mason comments on the four standard methods of extracting historical information from Josephus' writings (p. 36–43), which are as follows: “the winnowing method”, corroboration from archaeology, source criticism, the contradictory evidence (or “reading against the grain”). First, he presents “the winnowing method” as based on the conviction that there is a difference in the narrative between facts conveyed through the text and their interpretation (or bias of) by the author, and by identifying and removing the latter (e.g. exaggeration, miraculous or bizarre elements), one can arrive at the historical core. This procedure is rejected by Mason both on ideological grounds and by suggesting that Josephus' involvement in composing his narratives goes much further than just adding embellishment to the core material. Secondly, as for archaeology, Mason says that it can only clarify the general conditions of the narrative setting but cannot confirm actions described in the narrative. In this context, he remarks that there is a good chance that Josephus' writings could work like modern historical novels: they use “real settings but entirely invent characters, plots, and events” (p. 37). As for source criticism, he believes that most textual phenomena understood as indicators of sources (repetitions of vocabulary, doublets in content, a change of vocabulary for the same object, abrupt digressions, changes of subject, shifts in temporal or geographical setting, etc.) can also be interpreted as devices of Josephus' literary art (calculated repetition of charged language, changes of narrative voice, complexity of character development, variation of diction, diversionary excursions, etc.). Lastly, Mason presents the fourth standard approach using the examples of M. Goodman's and J. Price's contributions.³ In short, if we determine Josephus' programmatic ideas for his writings (e.g. the outbreak of the uprising against Rome has to be blamed on sectarian groups, and not on the aristocratic elites, including Josephus himself!), but, at the same time, we detect in his narrative material disagreement with these ideas (actions of the aristocrats against the Romans recorded by Josephus in passing), such material is believed to be historically valuable. According to Mason, all such inaccuracies in the narrative can be explained as literary devices, namely as deliberate and artful tensions introduced into the narrative, and conflicting reports in Josephus' writings about his own life serve as the strongest evidence.

What are the consequences of all this criticism for historians of ancient Judea according to Mason? First and foremost, he believes that if Josephus is the

³ M. Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: the Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome, A.D. 66–70*, Cambridge 1987; J. Price, *Jerusalem under Siege. The Collapse of the Jewish State 66–70 C.E.*, Leiden 1992.

only source we have, his writings cannot be used for historical reconstructions. Theoretically, we may then “reconstruct hypothesis for heuristic purposes only, abandoning any claim to probability” (p. 136), but the most appropriate approach in such cases is to focus on Josephus’ accounts as “historical phenomena, produced in particular circumstances” (p. 137), and so to gain social-historical knowledge on Roman Judea or a writer like Josephus composing in Flavian Rome. Only if there is alternative evidence can Josephus be used for historical reconstructions with all due caution, since, for Mason, his writings are like “Ridley Scott’s film *Gladiator*” (p. 39) where Josephus is the only “producer, writer, director, set designer, and sometimes actor” (p. 39).

Mason’s ideas have had a great deal of resonance in scholarship in recent years, and it is not easy to unambiguously judge his contribution. On the one hand, there is much truth in the statement that many historians naively copied Josephus’ passages, and considered such paraphrases as history. Some even paraphrased Josephus’ picture of his characters’ thoughts and emotions in their publications. It is also true that Josephus’ writings can be treated as literary constructs, as Mason and others have aptly shown many times. However, one cannot avoid the impression that some of Mason’s ideas are rather one-sided. He writes about some historical reconstructions as characterized by “arbitrariness”, “different tastes” (p. 136), “speculation”, “mere possibility” (p. 134). Such deficiencies can of course happen in historically orientated research, as in any other field of science and scholarship. Yet, since when is the literary analysis so recommended by Mason the opposite of the speculation characteristic only of historians? On the contrary, both literary criticism and historic research are two fields of research in which one operates within various layers of certainty, probability and plausibility. Furthermore, for historians it is necessary to evaluate their sources (and it is indeed nothing new), among others, to take account of the results of *literary analysis*, but the historical value of sources can only be decided upon a one-on-one case of *historical investigation*. In other words, on the basis of literary analysis *alone* one cannot draw conclusions about the other level – historical value – and this is exactly what has been done by Mason, who simply went beyond his own realm of expertise which has always been, with excellent results, literary analysis. One may only hope that one day Josephan studies will come to a state like that of current Biblical studies, where different approaches can peacefully co-exist in the catalogue of scholarly methods, and none claims the sole superiority of his preferred exegetical method. If someone wants to explore *how* Josephus composed his narrative, that is fine. If someone “cannot just sit on the fence and discuss Josephus’s aims and narrative construction,”⁴ it is fine too. After all,

⁴ Grabbe 2000, 46.

the question arises as to whether we do justice to Josephus by treating him only as someone for whom truthfulness, precision and probability of his writings were only rhetorical and moral categories. It is true that the modern perception of history differs from the ancient one in several respects, but no one who has ever read Josephus' preface to *Antiquities Iudaicae* will easily take on Mason's persuasion. After all, it is hard to believe that Josephus did the opposite of what he had himself criticized in *Ant.* 1.2, that is, he did not "write history", but only wanted to gain respect by composing a skillful composition (see *Ant.* 1.2).

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