DANIEL R. SCHWARTZ

Reading the First Century

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
300

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On Reading Josephus and Studying Jewish History of the First Century

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Daniel R. Schwartz, born 1952; 1980 PhD, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; since 1995 Professor of Jewish History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

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Arnaldo Dante Momigliano (1908–1987)
In Memoriam

Preface

> The movement toward reading *Josephus through,* and not merely reading *through Josephus* to external realities, now provides the dominant agenda.[1]
>
> The historian is not an interpreter of sources, although interpret he does. Rather, he is an interpreter of the reality of which the sources are indicative signs, or fragments.[2]

The title of this volume, "Reading the First Century," is deliberately paradoxical, for what we in fact read are texts, not a period of time. My formulation is meant to point up the belief that by reading texts we can discover what happened in a particular period of time – in this case, the first century. The expression of such a belief, once a commonplace, is a response to those who would hold that *all* we can do with texts is read them – that moving from texts to the historical periods they claim to represent is impossible, either because (as many theorists would have it) all historiography is only "narrative" and "empowerment" or because for antiquity, at least, our documentation is so meager that it does not allow responsible reconstruction of what really happened.

The approach we follow is known as the philological-historical one, for it studies ancient history on the basis of the study of written sources that have survived from antiquity. There are, of course, other approaches to the study of history, including ancient history. Basically, there are two other alternatives, which – if we think of modern historians of antiquity as working in a deep shaft down to the chronological level, and in the region, that interest them – we may term "horizontal" and "vertical." Horizontally, such historians can stick to ancient sources but broaden their view so as to study (a) the direct evidence supplied by non-written sources – for example the remains of buildings, of utensils, or of works of art – that relate to the

[1] S. Mason, "Contradiction or Counterpoint? Josephus and Historical Method," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 6 (2003) 146 (original emphases).

[2] A. Momigliano, "The Rules of the Game in the Study of Ancient History" – below, p. 189.

ancient region or people that interest them, and/or (b) the indirect evidence supplied by the ancient sources of all types that relate to other regions and peoples of the ancient world, in the reasonable expectation that they will afford a basis for inferences concerning the ones that interest us. Thus, for example, anyone interested in studying Roman rule in Judea may supplement the written sources that report about Roman rule in Judea both by non-written sources from Judea and by written and non-written evidence about other Roman provinces. Vertically, in contrast, such historians can study the history of other – and often better-documented – places and times and attempt to build models that will allow them to imagine similar processes in the period and region that are the object of their study. Thus, to stay with the same example, it is likely that those interested in understanding Roman rule in ancient Judea may profit from comparative studies of Spanish rule in South America or British rule in India.

Both of those other approaches can be very useful, but in the nature of things, even in the best cases they supply information that is general. That is usually good enough for such broad and general fields as cultural and social history. In contrast, the written sources about the place and time that interest us *offer* us specific information about ancient people and episodes, just as they also *offer* us the nuts and bolts we need to build a basic chronological outline of the historical period – which is, of course, the basis for any study of causality, for something can cause something else only if it precedes it in time. This volume, which is devoted to the study of Jewish history of the first century, addresses the written sources and focuses on the questions we must ask and the conditions we must impose when deciding whether, and to what extent, to accept what those sources offer.

The writings of Flavius Josephus are our main source for Jewish history of the first century. As our opening citation from Steve Mason indicates, however, in Josephan studies today it is in fact very common to hold that we should, because of doubts pertaining to the move from any sources to history, or at least because of doubts pertaining to the move from ancient sources to ancient history, stick to reading his writings in order to understand him and his works. As Tessa Rajak put it, commenting on the twenty years that passed between the 1983 appearance of her book on Josephus and its reprinting in 2002:

> There have been welcome shifts in the emphasis of scholarship over these years. Notably, interest seems to be declining in the critical question which has always dogged Josephus, the matter of his truthfulness. This was territory which any book on Josephus had to enter – and probably still does – and where I felt it imperative to defend an often thoughtlessly maligned author. But at least now it is well understood that there are other ways of looking at a historian's writings than weighing them, in as many different ways as possible, on the simple scale of truth or falsehood. The

"detective historians," to borrow a phrase from Steve Mason, have had their day. This development brings with it a readiness to push harder along lines which I did seek to initiate, reading Josephus' accounts of the history and culture of his own day and age not just as evidence for reconstructing the situation, but as itself a large and fascinating part of that history. This made Josephus' inevitable and highly visible biases into a feature to be welcomed and exploited.[3]

That is, while Rajak does somewhat parenthetically admit that historians studying the writings of Josephus should "probably still" care about the truth of what he wrote about things beyond himself, she welcomes the relative sidelining of such interests and the fact that Josephus and his writings have themselves, along with their evidence for him and his times rather than for the events he describes, become more and more the focus of scholarly interest.

The world of scholarship, however, is multihued, and the fact is that "detective historians" working on various cases have continued to do so. And while sometimes some of them do so on the basis of a facile assumption that whatever Josephus wrote corresponded to what happened, in other cases the detectives fully recognize the problems along the way. In the present volume, I shall attempt to show that while there are real difficulties along the way from Josephus' works to reconstructing what really happened, there are also ways of dealing with them, and so in many cases the conclusion, that reasonable certainty is beyond our reach, is overly pessimistic.[4] At the same time, I hope to respond also to those who might admit that we can reconstruct what happened but tend to doubt – in line with Mason's "merely" and Rajak's "not just" – that this can be interesting and meaningful.

Over the past thirty years I have had the privilege of teaching, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a course for freshman historians entitled "From Sources to Events in the Study of Jewish History in the Period of the Second Temple, the Mishnah and the Talmud" – a course devoted to the sources for Jewish history during the millennium or so from Alexander the Great to Mohammed. Although I came to realize it only over time, the course is based on three major premises:

(1) that the stories told by modern historians, while based on the ancient sources, can be very different from what those sources say;

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[3] T. Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* (London: Duckworth, 2002[2]) xi.

[4] Thus, this volume may be regarded as an instance and application of the type of position taken by R.J. Evans in his *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997). For an earlier expression of such a position, with specific regard to ancient history, and especially in response to early expressions of post-modern doubts, see the 1975 essay by A. Momigliano appended to this volume – from which the second citation at the opening of this preface is taken.

(2) that we can – frequently if not always – responsibly and confidently move from reading sources to reconstructing what happened; and

(3) that it can be interesting and meaningful for us to do so.

The present volume, as much of my research over the past decades, is built upon insights and approaches developed in that course – especially that major part of it which deals with the Second Temple period, for which Josephus' writings are our main source. As is indicated by such formulations as "From Sources to Events" and "Reading the First Century," it is offered to those who, as I, are interested both in understanding the testimony of our sources and in moving beyond them to what really happened in the century which was, in such fundamental ways, the "first" for the Jews and Judaism, as we know them, just as much as it was for Christianity and the West.

I would like to thank most sincerely the Mandel Foundation and the Scholion Interdisciplinary Reseach Center in the Humanities and Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and the Social Sciences in Wassenaar, for fellowships that allowed me the time, and the working conditions, necessary for completing this project. I would also like to thank my friends, Prof. Robert Brody (Jerusalem) and Prof. Jan Willem van Henten (Amsterdam), for their most helpful critiques of of an early manuscript of this volume, and Steven Ben-Yishai and Hannah Wortzman for help with proofreading.

Daniel R. Schwartz Jerusalem, April 2012

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Abbreviations

Acts	Acts of the Apostles (in the New Testament)
Agrippa	D. R. Schwartz, *Agrippa I: The Last King of Judaea* (TSAJ 23; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1990)
ANRW	*Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*
Ant.	Josephus, *Antiquities*
BT	Babylonian Talmud
CCFJ	K. H. Rengstorf (ed.), *A Complete Concordance to Flavius Josephus*, I–IV (Leiden: Brill, 1973–1983)[1]
CPJ	V. A. Tcherikover, A. Fuks and M. Stern (ed.), *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, I–III (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1957–1964)
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
DM	H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 1933)
DSD	*Dead Sea Discoveries*
FJTC	*Flavius Josephus, Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2001–)
GLA	M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, I–III (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974–1984)
HJP	E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B. C.–A. D. 135)*, I–III (new English ed. by G. Vermes et al.; Edinburgh: Clark, 1973–1987)
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JGR	S. J. D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian* (Leiden: Brill, 1979; reprinted 2002)
JJS	*Journal of Jewish Studies*
JLCL	*Josephus,* I–IX (LCL; London: Heinemann and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1926–1965)[2]
JNT	S. Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1992; 2003[2])
JPFC	*The Jewish People in the First Century,* I–II (2 vols.; ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974–1976)
JQR	*Jewish Quarterly Review*

[1] Prior to the four main volumes of this concordance to Josephus' vocabulary there already appeared, as a supplementary volume, A. Schalit's concordance to proper names in Josephus: *Namenwörterbuch zu Flavius Josephus* (Leiden: Brill, 1968). In 2002, Brill reissued all five volumes in a two-volume "study edition."

[2] Reprintings since 1980 have appeared in ten and even in thirteen volumes. Although page numbers changed accordingly, the text and pagination have remained the same, and references to the first printing can easily be located in later ones by reference to the paragraph numbers.

JSJ	*Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period*
JSP	*Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha*
JURR	E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule from Pompey to Diocletian: A Study in Political Relations* (SJLA 20; corrected ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1981)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
Lexicon	H. St. J. Thackeray, *A Lexicon to Josephus*, I–IV (Paris: Geuthner, 1930–1955)
LSJ	H. G. Liddell and R. Scott (compilers), *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992; repr. of rev. 9th ed. by H. S. Jones et al., 1940; includes 1968 *Supplement*)
PT	Palestinian Talmud
SJLA	Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity
SL	Storia e letteratura
Studies	D. R. Schwartz, *Studies in the Jewish Background of Christianity* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 60; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1992)
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum / Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism

Chapter 1

Introduction: Who Needs Historians of the First Century?

1.1 The first century and Josephus

No one would deny that the first century was of pivotal and foundational importance both for western civilization and for the history of the Jews and Judaism. After all, it was the setting for the birth of Christianity and – following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, although of course not overnight – for Judaism's transformation from a religion centering around a single Temple, and a priesthood defined by birth, into a religion centered in innumerable synagogues and houses of study and led by rabbis who, whatever their birth, chose their profession.

Similarly, no one would deny that the works of Josephus, written toward the end of that century, and which have survived nearly intact and fill nine substantial volumes in the standard Greek-English edition (*JLCL*), constitute the main source for Jewish history of that period.[1] Of his four works, the two larger ones – the *Judean War*[2] and the *Antiquities of the Jews* – provide the main framework for our knowledge of the post-biblical history of the Jews, until the first century CE (when Josephus lived and wrote), and they also supply much of the contents as well. Indeed, no one would deny that Josephus' own life (37–ca. 100 CE), which transformed him from Joseph ben Mattathias, priest of Jerusalem and rebel general in the Galilee (an episode which is the focus of one of his smaller works, his *Life* [also known as *Vita*]), into Flavius Josephus of Rome, historian and protégé of emperors, thus taking him from one pole of the conflict to the other, personifies the central tensions and transformations of the Jewish world in the first century. Similarly, his fourth work, *Against Apion*, a polemical treatise in which he defends the Jews against various charges brought against them by Greek-writing authors, shows his own awareness of the conflicted world in which the Jews of his day lived.

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[1] For some basic introductions to Josephus, see P. Bilde, *Flavius Josephus between Jerusalem and Rome* (*JSP* Supplement Series 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988) and T. Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* (London: Duckworth, 2002[2]).

[2] Formerly known as the *Jewish War*; see below, Ch. 5, n. 117.

1.2 Who needs historians, what can they do, and why bother?

What may be asked, however, is: Who needs historians to study this period? What could they possibly do that the ancient sources do not do? More particularly, questions frequently arise on two flanks of the modern historian whose work focuses on this period and, especially, on the main historical source of and for that period: the writings of Flavius Josephus.

On the one flank are those – generally freshmen or laymen – who wonder why one might need such modern historians, for all they can do is retell the stories provided by Josephus and whatever other ancient sources there might be. True, since those sources are written in ancient languages (mostly Greek, some in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Latin) they require the work of translators. But why historians? If – so it is supposed – those sources are reliable they need only be translated, and if they are not reliable but are all that modern historians have to build upon, what can such historians possibly hope to do?

On the other flank are those – generally professional historians – who, while realizing that the ancient sources require much work on our part before they can tell their stories, doubt that one can with reasonable confidence move from reconstructing *stories* to the reconstruction of *history*. Whether as part of a sometimes doctrinaire epistemological "post-modern" skepticism that holds that all history in general is simply a matter of this or that writer's "narrative" and reflects no more than the writer's self-seeking quest for "empowerment," or rather out of despair about ancient history in particular, for which the sources are so few and fragmentary, we are often told that it is impossible to move from stories to history and that it is best that we recognize this.

True, such historians recognize that we can use the ancient sources to tell stories they did not try to tell us. All agree that we can study Josephus' writings to see what his Greek language and culture were like, what his notions and models concerning historical writing were, what knowledge he betrays of Jewish traditions, and what his attitudes were toward such topics as faith, dreams, slavery, prophecy, women, and canon, to mention just a few examples of such topics.[3] But the move from the stories he tells to what really happened is all too often thought to be impossible, something to be contemplated only by the naïve.

This point of view was bespoken vociferously by Horst R. Moehring, who from a 1957 doctoral dissertation on novelistic elements in Josephus' writings went on – via an oft-cited study that argued that most or all docu-

[3] For an idea of the extent and variety of this type of work, see L. H. Feldman, *Josephus and Modern Scholarship (1937–1980)* (Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 1984).

ments preserved in Josephus are either forged or so corruptly transmitted as to be useless – to a basic position that with regard to what one may derive from Josephus, the word *fact* can be used only when surrounded with quotation marks.[4] Moehring was very extreme in this regard. But it is the same theme, basically, that we find, for a very prominent and recent example, in the complaint on the back cover of a volume by Steve Mason, that scholars "have often strip-mined Josephus for selfish reasons,"[5] which within the volume is explained to mean that they have been "ripping chunks out of Josephus and citing them as 'raw data' or facts – as if they were written by a robot and not a real human mind with a story to tell." In fact, he claims, "scholars had been so preoccupied with *using* Josephus for various purposes that they had largely ignored the literary character of his writings." Accordingly, he calls upon us "to read Josephus as an author," to "listen carefully enough to Josephus' own story."[6] That is, we should read Josephus so as to understand Josephus – something which, as Mason and other have shown,

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[4] See *JJS* 31 (1980) 240–242. In this review of Cohen, *JGR*, Moehring complains that "It has become fashionable in some circles … to return to the naive view that historians of the Graeco-Roman age can be made to yield information that would allow us to reconstruct the 'historical facts' of Hellenistic Judaism or the early church. Cohen seems to believe that it is actually possible to separate 'fact' from 'fiction' …" For two of Moehring's earlier works that nourished, respectively, optimism about Josephus as an author and skepticism about his usefulness as an historian, see his "Novelistic Elements in the Writings of Flavius Josephus" (unpublished dissertation, Univ. of Chicago, 1957) and "The *Acta pro Judaeis* in the *Antiquities* of Flavius Josephus: A Study in Hellenistic and Modern Apologetic Historiography," in: *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, III (ed. J. Neusner; SJLA 12/3; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 124–158. For responses to the latter, see T. Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome* (Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums 48; Leiden: Brill, 2001), esp. 304–311 (originally in *Journal of Roman Studies* 74 [1984] 109–112) and M. Pucci Ben Zeev, *Jewish Rights in the Roman World: The Greek and Roman Documents Quoted by Josephus Flavius* (TSAJ 74; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck] 1998) 8–10, 356–368. For another study by Moehring, see below, Ch. 3, n. 55.

[5] Mason, *JNT.* The language is reminiscent of that of Ernst Haenchen, who – with regard to another major work of first-century historiography – praised his predecessor Martin Dibelius for uprooting "the deeply-rooted tendency to regard Acts as no more than a quarry to furnish material for the reconstruction of primitive Christianity" (*The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1971] 41). The image is popular; for Moehring's complain about the way another scholar "abused [Josephus' writings] as a mine to be quarried for positive information or detailed information on specific points," see his "Joseph ben Matthia and Flavius Josephus: The Jewish Prophet and Roman Historian," *ANRW* II/21.2 (1984) 925. On Moehring, see our preceding note; on Haenchen, cf. below, Ch. 3, n. 16.

[6] The first and last of these four snippets are from Mason, *JNT*, 27 and 28; the middle two from Mason's introduction to *FJTC* 3 (2000) xiii, xv. See also his introduction to *Understanding Josephus: Seven Perspectives* (ed. S. Mason; *JSP* Supplement Series 32; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 11, and the quotation opening our Preface (above, p. VII) – where Mason's "merely" echoes Haenchen's "no more than" cited in our preceding note.

can be quite interesting. And it is also, of course, a type of history, for Josephus was an historical figure of the first century, and learning about him is a part of learning about it. Similarly, yet more recently Michael Stanislawski, a modern historian who reflects well the same trend in Josephan scholarship, writes very decidedly, in connection with Josephus' autobiography, on both sides of the coin:

> [T]he time has come simply to cease using the *Vita* as a source for the facts of Josephus' life-story … Rather, we should approach this text simply as the literary record of Josephus's last, retroactive self-fashioning … Given what we now know about the vagaries of autobiographical memory and autobiography writing, we cannot continue to reconstruct Josephus's life-story on the basis of the *Vita*. But this autobiography remains an extraordinary historical document, a superbly evocative testimony to the author's unrelenting and never resolved struggle to fashion himself at once as a loyal Jew and a loyal subject of Rome.[7]

However, these two arguments, the negative and the positive, by themselves do not create much of a dispute. For even those who hold we should read Josephus as evidence for Josephus himself assume that we can know *something* – in fact, quite a lot – about him and his historical context. That is, scholars who work on Josephus do in fact agree that Rome, Jerusalem, rebellion, the Galilee, Vespasian, Titus and the like are not merely rhetoric and narrative; they were real and are taken for granted in the interpretation of the meaning of Josephus' writings. Moreover, they accept the main points of Josephus' curriculum vitae as he presents it: born and raised in Jerusalem, participated in the Jewish rebellion of 66 CE, thereafter prisoner and then client of the Flavians, who took him to Rome and saw to his livelihood there. So the argument focuses only on smaller details and on contexts: Can we really learn from Josephus' writings what he himself did in Jerusalem or the Galilee, or how Roman governors such as Pontius Pilate dealt with the Jews, or – moving back in time – more than the barest facts about the reigns of Herod, the Hasmoneans, etc.? Such doubts are only a matter of degree, not a matter of principle.

As for the positive argument, that it is worthwhile to study Josephus for his own sake, here too there is really not much argument. The fact is that good historians have always recognized that they cannot simply "strip-mine" facts from their sources, extracting tidbits (or more) without taking notice of the interests, biases, habits, sources, and models of the authors who recorded them. For it is obvious that an author's interests impact upon the way he or she reports whatever is reported, just as they guide the very decision to record some things and not others. Anyone who would ignore

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[7] M. Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews: Essays in Jewish Self-Fashioning* (Seattle and London: Univ. of Washington, 2004) 24, 31.