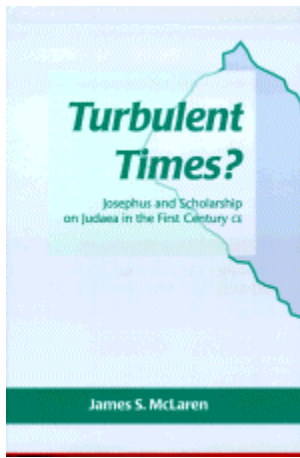


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McLaren, James S.

Turbulent Times?: Josephus and Scholarship on Judaea in the First Century CE

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With the rising interest in Josephus and the events he describes, the question of how historically reliable his works are poses itself more and more insistently. McLaren tries to address this question head-on in this ambitious programmatic study of the historiography of the period 6-66 CE in Judaea. Josephus and scholarly publications since 1973 are subjected to close scrutiny. McLaren argues that "contemporary scholarship has generally proclaimed conceptual independence from Josephus but has failed to achieve this goal" (pp. 18-19). "It is a central tenant [*sic*] of this study that the existing discussion within scholarship that purports to establish independence from Josephus's interpretation is fundamentally flawed" (p. 17). Repeatedly he points out that Josephus' narrative is constructed around two basic pillars: "Judaea was a place of increasing turmoil and . . . the revolt was bound to take place" (p. 18; cf. p. 292, and *passim*). He does not argue, although he seems to imply, that these assertions are incorrect, and shows how central they are to Josephus' interpretative framework, and how they have been accepted, often unconsciously, by modern scholarship.

The first five chapters are largely descriptive, but--as McLaren constantly reminds us regarding Josephus--subject matter and commentary are inseparable. This also holds true for McLaren's work. Chapter 1 provides a basic summary of Josephus' accounts of the years 6-66 CE. Chapter 2 concentrates on Josephus' qualities and limitations as a writer. In chapter 3, the interpretative framework of each of his historiographical writings (*J.W.*, *Ant.*, *Life*) is examined. Chapters 4-5 turn to the use of Josephus in scholarly literature since 1973. Here are included general surveys of the first century as well as studies that

deal with single issues, such as the causes of the Great Revolt, the popular movements, the historical Jesus and early Christianity, Galilee, the course of the Revolt, and Judea after 70 CE. While the selection of works (all in English) is rather broad, it is a pity that McLaren seems to be unaware of important items in other languages (e.g. Klaus-Stefan Krieger, *Geschichtsschreibung als Apologetik bei Flavius Josephus*, [Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter 9; Tübingen: Francke, 1994] reviewed in *JBL* 116 [1997] 129-32).

Considering that "the search for a life raft among existing scholarship is a lost cause" (p. 235), McLaren begins in chapter 6 to present his remedy. His aim is "To outline a means by which we can explain the state of affairs in first-century CE Judaea using Josephus's narrative, but in a way that allows us to be independent of his framework" (p. 219). But not only Josephus' framework is questionable: "It is a fallacy to believe that Josephus' bias can be separated from the narrative and that a 'core' of historical events is then left over. To siphon out the bias is to remove the entire narrative" (p. 235, similarly p. 237). Nevertheless, McLaren contends: "The primary goal here is to establish, so far as possible, what actually happened" (pp. 253-54).

McLaren finds his "life raft" in the case study approach that he had used in his Oxford dissertation (*Power and Politics in Palestine: The Jews and the Governing of Their Land 100 BC-AD 70* [JSNTSup 63; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991]). He briefly explains how this method takes seriously the description of events in Josephus, while remaining independent of his interpretative framework. In the seventh and last chapter, he applies this method to three incidents of 66 CE recorded in *J.W.*

McLaren admits that these incidents (the capture of Masada by a rebel group, the rejection of sacrifices offered by foreigners, and the capture of Machaerus) "are all described in only one text, making the principle of inherent plausibility a crucial factor in explaining what aspects of the account portray historical events" (p. 264). He also wisely concedes that in the study of Josephus as elsewhere "we require a sense of balance" (p. 258) and "that 'subjectivity' is ever present in the examination of history" (p. 224 n. 7). Thus the case study approach does not function automatically or unequivocally. Therefore the bold proclamation that "it is crucial that the case study approach be employed . . . in every historical inquiry where an understanding of what actually happened is the primary goal" (p. 293) may be a bit overconfident.

Some critical questions might be raised at this point. First, in order to judge "inherent plausibility," does one not need some prior idea of the context? McLaren claims that "the appropriate frame of reference, presuming there is one for understanding the first century, must flow from the analysis, not precede it" (p. 259). This seems to be an overly simplified view of the historian's task and possibilities.

McLaren emphasizes repeatedly that one has to beware of the two pillars of Josephus' description of the first century. But Tacitus, whose interpretative framework seems to be different from Josephus', also speaks of a situation that became more and more unbearable under successive procurators. Similarly, while Josephus' use of sources is frequently acknowledged, the implications of their biases and limitations are never addressed. A marginal but interesting question of sources arises, when McLaren refers to Josephus' trip to Rome to plead for the freedom of *two* priests (p. 52, correctly "several priests," p. 205). Their number is never specified by Josephus, but H. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden* (vol. 3.2, 5th ed.; Leipzig: Leiner, 1906, p. 483) and L. Moraldi's recent Italian translation of Josephus' *Antiquities* (Turin: UTET, 1998, p. 35) also refer to "two" priests. Is Graetz the ultimate source for McLaren and Moraldi?

McLaren seldom provides Greek terminology. Citing Jonathan Price, however, he refers to "stasis" (pp. 172-73, without italics) not in the English sense of "stagnation" but in the Greek sense of "factionalism." He relies in part on the English terminology of Thackeray to characterize groups of Jews. According to McLaren (p. 84), the "deceivers and impostors" of *J.W.* 2.259 reappear, grouped with the "brigands," in *J.W.* 2.264-65. Such a terminological connection is only partially present in Thackeray (LCL) and entirely absent from the Greek.

In his survey of recent studies, McLaren tries to outline their positions fairly, but sometimes misrepresents them. E.P. Sanders states that "there were periods of . . . peace and tranquillity," not that the first century was a period of peace and tranquillity, as attributed to him by McLaren (p. 177).

Despite these criticisms, McLaren's work is apt to advance our understanding of the complicated and fascinating history of the first century. The author intends to apply the methodology demonstrated here to a study of the period (p. 260 n. 1). This reviewer is eagerly looking forward to seeing it and to learning from it.