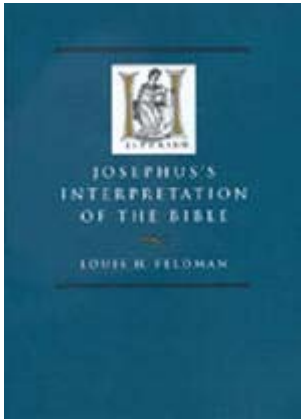


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Feldman, Louis H.

Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. Pp. xvi + 837, Cloth, \$75.00, ISBN 0520208536.

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This volume is the culmination of three decades of detailed scholarship on the first ten books of Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*. Drawing on the immense range and depth of this work, Professor Feldman argues that Josephus should be understood as "the earliest systematic commentator on the Bible . . . [who] is consequently of the greatest value" (p. xiv). With this basic premise in mind, Feldman sets about examining the principles that guided Josephus in his understanding of the Bible. The two concerns that set the agenda for this examination are "the extent to which, in his rewriting of the Bible, Josephus made his own creative contribution" and "the extent to which he has a marked and generally consistent point of view, consonant with certain themes in his book" (p. xiv). The work is divided into two parts. The first deals with introductory matters relating to Josephus's purposes and techniques in retelling the Bible. It covers Josephus as a rewriter of the Bible, the qualities of the biblical heroes, Josephus as an apologist, and stylistic and other change he introduced into the biblical narrative. This section also includes a chapter relating Josephus's work to other ancient historians, particularly those of the schools of Isocrates and Aristotle. Feldman argues that Josephus was deeply influenced by the moralizing, psychologizing, and dramatizing tendencies of the Isocratean school and by the empirical historiographical principles of the Aristotelian school. The second part of the book consists of detailed studies of twelve key biblical figures (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samson, Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon, and Daniel) designed to test the degree to which Josephus's own purposes are fulfilled in his rewriting of the Bible. A fairly brief conclusion summarizes the work's findings and is followed by extensive bibliography and indexes that add significantly to the value of the book as a reference tool.

Feldman's basic methodology is to compare Josephus's reworking of the biblical material with his alleged sources and to draw more or less speculative conclusions from the differences and similarities. Primary among the sources in view are, of course, the biblical texts themselves. Feldman finds evidence suggesting that Josephus had access to three textual traditions, in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic (pp. 23-36) though we cannot be sure how his texts relate to those that have come down to us. Feldman also assesses Josephus's infamous promise not to modify the Scriptures (pp. 37-16) and concludes that since Josephus saw himself as an interpreter of the Bible, rather than simply a translator, he did in essence remain true to his word. As an interpreter of the Bible, Josephus seems to have had recourse to a number of other written sources (e.g., *Jubilees*, the *Genesis Apocryphon*, the Dead Sea Pesharim, Philo, Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*) as well as to unwritten traditional material (pp. 51-54). In an interesting and potentially controversial move that suggests a certain ambivalence in Feldman's own mind, he relegates his discussion of Josephus's knowledge of "rabbinic tradition" to an appendix to chapter two (pp. 65-73). In the preface to the book Feldman acknowledges that his views here run counter to the dominant view that the use of rabbinic material to illuminate a first century text is anachronistic (p. xv). Feldman's basic contention is that Josephus exhibits familiarity with traditions of interpretation that would not be reduced to writing by the rabbis for several centuries to come. While this would seem to be a sound position in theory, what is somewhat more questionable is Feldman's regular practice of including comparisons between Josephus and rabbinic works that show no similarities with Josephus at all. In other words, while it is one thing to note instances where Josephus may have had access to "rabbinic tradition" (because of *similarities* in the texts), it is quite another to draw conclusions from *dissimilarities* in the texts as this amounts to arguing from silence.

Beyond the use of sources of one kind or another, Feldman argues cogently that Josephus's own apologetic agenda probably accounts for many of his alterations to and embellishments of the biblical narrative (pp. 54-56). His chapter on this last point ("Josephus as Apologist to Non-Jews and to Jews," pp. 132-162) is particularly significant because it gets to the heart of what Josephus was trying to achieve. Feldman agrees with Gregory Sterling's generic categorization of the *Antiquities* as "apologetic historiography" and sets out to describe the apologetic orientation of Josephus's rewriting of the Bible. Significant issues covered in this regard include the establishment of the historicity of biblical events, the biblical portrayal of non-Jewish leaders (e.g. Pharaoh), biblical attitudes towards assimilation and intermarriage, nationalism, and proselytism. This chapter alone with its thorough survey of the relevant data will make this volume a valuable resource to all interested in Jewish self-understandings and attitudes to the "other" in the Roman period.

The studies in part two of the book will be familiar ground to all who are familiar with the many "portraits" of biblical figures published by Feldman over many years. While some of this material repeats material earlier in the book, especially from chapter three

("The Qualities of the Biblical Heroes" pp. 74-131), these studies represent the detailed comparison of Josephus's texts with the many "sources" referred to above. Feldman also displays his vast knowledge of classical literature more generally by pointing out numerous "parallels" between Josephus's portrayals of various famous personages and characters from the writings of Homer, Hesiod, Sophocles, and the like.

In the final analysis, this is the most thorough full-scale treatment of Josephus's rewriting of the Bible yet to appear, and is without doubt *the* standard work on the subject.