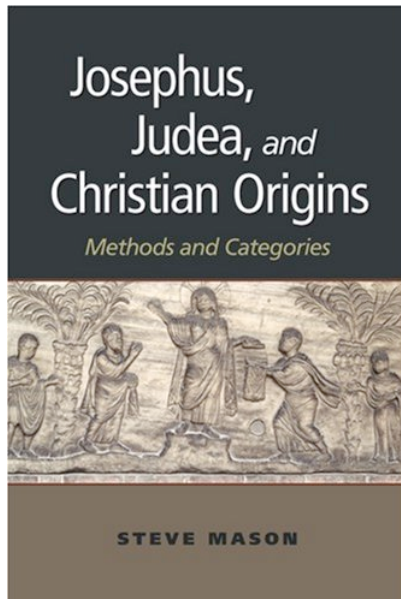


RBL 11/2009



Mason, Steve

Josephus, Judea, and Christian Origins: Methods and Categories

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2009. Pp. xx + 443. Paper. \$34.95. ISBN 1598562541.

Sean Freyne
Trinity College
Dublin, Ireland

Steve Mason's latest collection of essays on Josephus and Christian origins is to be warmly welcomed, even if the main focus of these previously published papers is more on Josephus than on Christian origins per se. Thus, parts 1 and 2 of the collection deal with various aspects of contemporary Josephan study, a relatively new field of enquiry to which Mason has contributed handsomely. All the articles in these two parts of the collection have appeared in the last five years—a highly impressive output indeed. In addition, Mason is editor in chief of the ambitious Brill Josephus Project and has already produced an excellent translation and commentary on *Life of Josephus* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). The third section of the collection, dealing with Christian origins, contains two studies of Paul's letter to the Romans dated to the early 90s as well as another one from the same period dealing with Josephus and Luke-Acts.

The “methods and categories” that the subtitle signals refer to a paradigm shift in the study of Josephus's writings that Mason calls for. It would be a fair assessment to say that, insofar as these writings have in the past been used in the study of early Judaism and early Christianity, the approach has been highly eclectic. Either Josephus's reports were dismissed as the work of a self-serving apologist whose manifest exaggerations showed that he could not be trusted as a historian, or his writings were cherry-picked to

demonstrate aspects of the social or religious life of the period as suited a particular case that was being argued. These writings were deemed to present us with a unique and on the whole reliable window on Palestine in the Hasmonean and Herodian periods. They were, however, often employed in a highly uncritical manner, without any attention to the different perspectives of the individual works or the changes that had occurred in Josephus's own life, from the role of provincial governor appointed by the revolutionary council in the 60s to favored client of the Flavian dynasty in Rome in the 90s.

Mason's work builds on the studies of Shaye Cohen, Tessa Rajak, and Per Bilde, all of whom had in different ways emphasized a literary approach in the study of Josephus's writings. Yet Mason goes much further than any of these scholars in advocating this perspective. To begin with, he operates with a much broader canvas for judging Josephus's literary productions, given his wide-ranging acquaintance with Greco-Roman rhetorical styles, linguistic usage, and literary conventions. To this is added his insistence that Josephus was writing in Flavian Rome and that, insofar as his works have a real historical intent, it is with regard to the political demands of this later period that they are addressed and about which they can inform us.

Mason states his point of view quite clearly in his introduction: "I argue that using Josephus as a simple window into the past is in effect a category-mistake. He writes artistic narratives, not manuals of factual nuggets that may simply be appropriated as historical facts. ... Crucially where Josephus is our only source for specific events, personalities, intentions and motives, which is often the case, we must face the fact that we have no way of testing our hypotheses—and so we cannot claim to know" (2). This summary but sweeping statement will distress those who have believed that writing ancient history in particular, but to some extent all history, is an exercise in evaluating various hypotheses and judging their probability in a critical dialectic. Given the many lacunae in the evidence that we do have, both literary and archaeological, there is no other alternative except to give up on the enterprise entirely. With regard to Josephus's writings, there must surely be other options than regarding them as either "artistic narratives" or "manuals of factual nuggets"!

The rationale for Mason's view is developed in a lengthy opening chapter, "Josephus as Authority for First-Century Judea" (7–44). He begins with a discussion of what claims to truth or accuracy might mean in ancient historians generally and in Josephus's various works in particular. Authority, in the sense of a trustworthy character, rather than detailed investigator of the facts, was the accepted criterion for reliability, he claims. In the prologues to his writings Josephus seeks to establish his unparalleled credentials for reporting the events he narrates "accurately," in contrast to his various rivals. This discussion is useful in underlining the ways in which ancient conceptions differed from

our modern ones of what constitutes good history writing. According to Mason, it is this lack of understanding of the difference between ancient and modern history that has led to the misuse of Josephus's writings by many scholars in the modern period, as typified by Emil Schürer in his influential three-volume history of the period. This work sees itself as reporting facts about the world of first-century Judea, by simply taking Josephus's accounts at face value, without any discussion of the issues involved in such usage.

In order to establish his case beyond any possible doubt, Mason takes two narratives from Josephus's works—the accounts of “Pontius Pilate in the Judean War” and “Caesarea's role in the outbreak of the First Revolt”—as illustrations of how misreadings can occur. Both are long and detailed treatments uncovering interesting features of Josephus's compositional techniques, literary prowess, and penchant for artful and complex stories. When the differences between the parallel accounts in *Jewish War* and *Antiquities* are taken into consideration, they both have to be understood as artful stories that fit into the larger narrative frameworks of each work. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Mason's notions of history and history writing. He seeks to uncover the weaknesses of previous efforts at distilling some historical facts from Josephus's fiction, efforts that range from the search for core elements, to source criticism, and laterally to attempts to read Josephus's writings “against the grain,” thereby uncovering those elements that do not fit into his apologetic purposes and that can, therefore, be regarded as “true.” This latter method is exposed by Mason in a detailed essay later in the collection: “Contradiction or Counterpoint? Josephus and Historical Method” (103–40). None of these approaches is satisfactory, in Mason's judgment, since they operate with a misunderstanding of the character both of language and of history, each of which inevitably involves a second-order approach to what actually happened and therefore are subject to a critical hermeneutical process. With regard to Josephus's writings this means that “there is a fixed chasm between artful portraits of Pilate (e.g.) and the specific questions we might have about his reign” (40).

At least in the case of Pilate we have other sources that we can bring to bear on our questions, with some prospect of resolving them. We are faced with an “insurmountable problem,” however, when we have only Josephus as our guide and witness, as is often the case (24). In “Contradiction or Counterpoint?” Mason enters into a detailed critique of various recent attempts by Josephan scholars to distill historical facts from Josephus's fiction, while still relying on Josephus's narratives. The upshot is that “we have no place to stand that offers traction for getting behind Josephus” (136). Yet ironically (and irony is one of Josephus's artful techniques, according to Mason, a topic that is developed in another chapter, 66–93), once we shift our gaze from the events behind Josephus's narratives to the compositions seen as historical phenomena, a whole set of historical questions opens up with regard to the production and reception of these works (137).

This remark takes up the theme of another chapter, which is the most interesting in the collection for this reviewer: “Of Audience and Meaning: Reading Josephus’s *Judean War* in the Context of a Flavian Audience” (45–68).

Three further essays (chs. 5–7) are of special interest to students of early Christianity, the first two dealing with the Pharisees and the third with the Essenes. However, the focus is again on the Josephan portrayal of these “sects” rather than on any attempt to “discover” the historical Pharisees and Essenes, even though we do have independent sources dealing with both groups. A discussion as to how these sources corroborate or differ from Josephus’s accounts would have provided Mason with the opportunity to formulate hypotheses about the historical realities that could be tested with appeal to both literary and (at least in the case of the Essenes) archaeological evidence. Yet he is so intent on his new perspective that, disappointingly, he chooses not to go down that route, one suspects, because in his view this would be entering a blind alley. The Pharisees do not receive a significant role in either of Josephus’s major works, *War* or *Antiquities*, we are informed. The emphasis on them as a philosophy in the latter work gives Josephus the opportunity to show his erudition and his awareness of elite discussions in Flavian Rome. The portrait of the Essenes in *War* parallels what Josephus describes of the Judean people as a whole in *Against Apion* but also echoes various contemporary Greek accounts of the Spartans. It appears in book 2, in order to highlight the bravery and virtue of the Jewish people as a whole, thus supporting Josephus’s own self-portrait as the brave and heroic general whose military prowess was put to the service of his own people.

These essays are certainly a warning to scholars to examine carefully the narrative context and rhetorical intentions of Josephus in his individual works before summoning him as a trustworthy witness to Judean *realia*. This is an important corrective to the uncritical use of Josephus’s writings, a practice that many have been prone to adopt. In this respect, Mason’s broadside is not dissimilar to Jacob Neusner’s critique of the use of rabbinic sources in New Testament studies. Yet not everyone, I suspect, will be prepared to accept Mason’s artful and literary Josephus to the exclusion of any interest, however partisan, in the historical events that his texts evoke and reflect. If Josephus was as artful as Mason claims, then we must assume that he could balance various perspectives in his writings, both those relating to Flavian Rome and to prerevolt Judea. When all the narrative and rhetorical analysis has been completed, the fact remains that Josephus saw himself as writing not fiction but history, as his contemporaries understood such a project, and as his precursors, both Judean and Greco-Roman, had practiced for centuries.