

BOOK REVIEW

A History of the Jewish War, A.D. 66-74. By STEVE MASON. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 690. Hardcover, \$150.00. ISBN 978-0-521-85329-3.

The Jewish revolt against the Romans from 66-73/4 CE, and the dire consequences that followed—mainly the destruction of the so-called Second Temple in Jerusalem—marks a watershed in both Jewish and later Christian histories; almost nothing stayed the same for the former, and the latter embraced this event as a cornerstone of its gradually developing worldviews. For students of imperial Rome too, this insurgency offers something rare: a detailed, if fractional, glimpse into the military and political mechanisms that evolved around such events. Relatively few residents of Roman-controlled territories took arms against the empire, and for these almost no comprehensive records have survived.

Much of what we know about the uprising rests on the writing of one man, a Jewish historian known by his Roman name—(Titus) Flavius Josephus—who wrote seven books in Greek about the revolt, which he titled *The Jewish War* (in Latin *Bellum Judaicum*; hereafter *BJ*). He also made numerous references to specific incidents and characters from the revolt in his other surviving tomes. It is no surprise, therefore, that when one of the leading current scholars of Josephus, and the chief editor of the most up-to-date series devoted to a new translation and commentary of his writings (published by Brill), offers an exhaustive history of this revolt, I, probably like many others, approached it with excitement and anticipation.

Steve Mason begins his examination of the revolt from the end, devoting the first chapter (3–59) to the immediate and long-term outcomes for both Romans and Christians (but significantly overlooking the results for the Jews). He discusses in detail the triumph procession that the newly minted imperial family, the Flavians—who, prior to rising to the purple, also led the Roman army that fought the Jews in this war—carried out in Rome to celebrate their victory. He then moves to a brief examination of the monuments they erected in the city to commemorate the events and shape the public perception about it, and closes

with a somewhat haphazard analysis of Christian discourse on the revolt and the destruction of the Temple.

An epilogue turned long prologue, the author is able to incorporate into the chapter some of his basic views that will play out through the book. The revolt, in his mind, was an exceedingly insignificant event from a military standpoint—he evaluates the achievements of the Flavians as “modest” at best (3), dismissively downplays the violent clashes as mere “disturbance” (8) or “minimal” (14), and sneeringly labels the memories that transpired around these occurrences across the next two millennia as plain “fuss” (pages 4, 57). He goes out of his way to alleviate both the threat that the rebels, the Jewish residents of Judaea, could have posed, or the financial losses or gains that came with this population—he depicts Judaea as a poor backwater, “a remote region of an existing province comprising mainly desert and villages,” (35), compresses the mutinied region and population into the “ethnic hinterland of Jerusalem,” (9), and facetiously labels the Flavian acclaim for captured Jewish wealth as “pathetic” (31) and “nonsense” (33).

After spending the opening 57 pages on the outcome of the war, Mason moves in the next two chapters to another 136 pages of introductions. He calls this section of the book, together with the first chapter, “Contexts,” an unclear title that conceals more than it reveals: the context of what? Josephus’ books? The revolt? Discussing the contexts of the revolt would have required, for example, a discussion of the rebel society, its ideology and culture, all of which are decisively missing; also missing is a discussion of the geographical setting (which will be briefly mentioned first only on page 290!). It holds numerous, overly long, prefatory discussions on the meaning of history (61–71), rhetoric (73–80), the production of books in Rome (80–85.), the categories of *ethnos* and *polis* (pp. 88 ff.), the Roman army (138–155), morale in the army (155–166, 187–196), leadership (166–170), and tactics of war (171–187).

Here and there, the author refocuses on the subject of his book—tying the discussion of rhetoric, for example, to Josephus’ knowledge and use of its principles (76–78), and offering to understand *BJ* as a product of the rhetorical culture in Rome (80). (This potentially important claim, however, is neither substantiated nor is its significance explained.) Mason also discusses Josephus’ readership (84–87), the date, structure, and themes of *BJ* (91–106), as well as its sources (130–135). But mostly, the connections the author suggests between his introductions and the topic of the book remain artificial and forced. The same pattern of protracted, unnecessary deviations from the book’s topic continue to plague the text in the following chapters—e.g., six full pages packed with names, dates,

military ranks etc. about the battle of Monte Casino in WWII (502–508), endless pages to describe certain sites that played a role in the revolt, which splash the reader with unnecessary and trivial archaeological and geographical data (e.g. 395–405; 517–526), or an exhausting, twenty-page introduction to ancient coinage (471–491). Most annoying, though, is the author’s habit to lecture *ad nauseam* about trivial topics of method—such as the above mentioned postmodern discourse on the term “history” and its pitfalls, or the crash course he offers on political realism (217–225). Anyone beyond freshmen-level courses in college will find these utterly familiar, and readers of the book, I suspect, will keep asking—why do we need to read all of this? A satisfying answer eludes me.

The final six chapters of the book, grouped under the title “Investigations,” track the logical sequence of the revolt, more or less, beginning with the reasons that led to its eruption (chapter 4) and ending with the fighting in the desert palaces/forts in the years following the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 CE, culminating in the (in)famous mass suicide at Masada (Chapter 9). In between, Mason devotes a chapter to: the disastrous military expedition, just as the violence broke out, led by the governor of Syria Cestius Gallus (chapter 5); the fighting of the Roman army under the Flavians that followed Cestius’ failure in the north, in the region of Galilee (chapter 6); to the events and characters (as well as groups) in Jerusalem, leading up to the city’s destruction (chapter 7); and an appendix-turned-chapter devoted to two specific groups of sources and the information that can be gleaned from them—the coins minted by the rebels and two contradicting texts, by Josephus and the later Christian author Sulpicius Severus, regarding the order to burn the temple (Chapter 8). Closing the book are a short conclusion, summarizing Mason’s positions on methodology and history, an appendix on distances, a bibliography, list of abbreviations, and a bunch of indexes.

In these six main chapters (4-9) Mason follows a similar, if not identical, pattern. For the most part, he generously, at times extensively, paraphrases the relevant passages in Josephus’ *BJ* pertinent to the subject at hand, while examining and trying to assess their historical value. He also engages a selection of earlier scholarly positions on the topic, before offering his own reconstruction of the events and the issues that shaped them. As a general rule, Mason tends to summarily reject the reliability of Josephus’ story (at one point comparing it to a modern fictional film; 577) as well as the various positions of modern historians; as such, he pitches his book as highly provocative and radically revisionist.

Whereas Josephus, for example, says that when the Romans arrived to the northern region of Galilee, the area was engulfed in fierce fighting and bloodshed (e.g. *BJ* 3.63) with only Sepphoris being the pacifistic exception (*ibid.*, 30), Mason dismisses all that as fiction. He claims that for the Romans it was a walk in the park, so to speak, or in his words—“there was no Galilean war” (see, for example, 358–359, and his summary on 586–587). Rather, he limits the fighting to negligible local skirmishes; to one battle (in Iotapata), that he says was vastly inflated in Josephus’ descriptions, should have never happened, and was easily crushed by the Romans, as well as other clashes (in Tiberias, Taricheae, and Gamla), which were not really related to the Romans, taking place in territories under the control of Agrippa II, although the Roman army did take part in them.

Similarly, many modern scholars trace deep, anti-Roman sentiment among various strata of the Jewish population, going back generations before the war started, and view it as an important, if not sole factor in a long conflict that eventually also led to the revolt; Mason cans all that (chapter 4, in particular pages 200, 215) in favor of an almost ideal love story he constructs between the vast majority of the Jews and Rome. In his words, Jews “had no reason in real life to hate Romans,” up until the revolt itself, when Roman armies “manufactured” their hatred (578–579; if this resonates with some readers like anti-American propaganda about current deeds in the Middle East, that would be drawing your own conclusions). Even when the Jews battled the Romans, it was not the Romans they were meaning to fight. According to Mason, it was only the fierce competition between Jews and their gentile, local neighbors that got out of hand and caused this war with Rome.

By the end of the book, nearly nothing we knew, or thought we knew, about the revolt remains the same. The Sikarians are not an anti-Roman, semi-messianic group, rather they are simply an invention of Josephus (257); the Zealots, a charged term with historical roots in the biblical past, denoting the politically violent, uncompromising nature of its members, is actually a mistranslation, and the group behind it should be referred to by the neutral, unthreatening title “Disciples” (443–450). Even the mass suicide on Masada never happened. Laying out a few alternative options, according to the one Mason favors, most of the besieged actually surrendered, only to be murdered by the Roman soldiers (573–574).

How are we to evaluate such a total revision to our knowledge? Mason’s major strength shines when he wears the hat of a classicist, a literary scholar of ancient texts, in particular a commentator of Josephus. His knowledge of Greek runs deep, and his textual and philological capabilities in regard to Josephus’

work are sound, as is his general knowledge of the Roman world. He is a meticulous and suspicious reader of ancient texts and occasionally this enables him to offer interesting interpretations of both individual phrases and longer passages in Josephus. Making good use, for example, of electronic tools that count words and compare their provenance (e.g. 123 note 212), Mason sheds new light on the text, unveiling a circular literary make-up, what he terms a “ring structure” (99–100), or dissecting its chronological framework and highlighting its problems (e.g. 301–309). The book offers a nice crop of textual nuggets.

At the same time, many of his historical readings of specific sources are rather forced; one example is his suggestion that the date “year 6” on a document found in Masada should relate to an imagined “city year” of the settlement and not to the prevalent dating system (namely, the years of the revolt) that existed there on endless coins and some documents (551). Neither parallels to such settlement counting are provided—for all we know Masada was a refuge commune, not even a village, not to mention a city with its own calendar and dating system—nor a reason to neglect the basic principle of historical interpretation, namely reading a document within its context, which in this case comprises numerous sources that count to the years of the revolt.

Indeed, Mason’s historical analysis and conclusions leave much to be desired; in particular he too often tends to neglect central, heavyweight arguments that would tilt the equation away from his “revolutionary” reconstructions. Due to the space constraints of this review, I will limit myself to one example. A central argumentative thread of the book—the tantalizing, provocative thesis mentioned above regarding the insignificance of the uprising in the eyes of contemporary Romans—is the notion that “there was no foreign people, army, or king to be conquered in Judaea, certainly no new wealth to be brought home” (13). Never, in regard to this reoccurring theme, does Mason consider the immediate parallel that must have been on the mind of any statesman or serious military leader in the Mediterranean world: the Hasmonaean revolt. After all, in the not too distant past, a group of Jews with neither an army nor a king had taken arms against the world power of their time—the Seleucid kingdom—and in a gradual process carved for themselves the strongest local kingdom of the day, with an army, a king, wealth, and territory.

When Mason pronounces that “absolute freedom has not been possible in Judaea for centuries” (546), he forgets that Alexander Jannaeus reigned there less

than 150 years prior. Similarly, when Mason discounts the region's financial fortunes as made of mere "villages and desert," he fails to remind the reader that just two generations prior, it was the home of the one of the wealthiest men in the entire world, Herod, and that the riches of his family and associates, and wealthy land owners and businessmen in general, were surely still prevalent in the days of the revolt. In the same vein, the desert he belittles was home to one of the most prosperous industries of the Mediterranean—the production of balsam. Since we know little about what the Romans thought about the threat posed by the uprising of Jews, one of the few reliable sources of inference are their actions in the region. The staggering number of soldiers that the Romans mobilized to engage in the conflict—first some 30,000 with Cestius Gallus and then more than doubled by Vespasian—are well known to Mason, but he somehow fails to consider them when formulating his arguments. Marching these forces hundreds of miles, from far away places around the eastern Mediterranean, with all the logistical difficulties and strategic risks involved in this, speaks volume to Roman concerns.

None of this seems to have registered in Mason's mind when he vehemently argues that Cestius, for example, "never imagined" (299) that he would need to use this army for a siege on Jerusalem, since the loving Jews were supposed to open the gates for him and accept him with confetti. In the many unnecessary pages that Mason devotes to surveying over two millennia worth of world conflicts, he doesn't seem to glean a basic truth about warfare — if you bring soldiers, it's because you probably think you will need them.

Such deficiencies in argument, when taken together with other blunders that dilute the book—its unnecessary length and murky structure, its numerous typos,¹ the author's flimsy, usually second-hand knowledge of Hebrew and/or Aramaic,² the spoken vernacular of one of the major groups of people he is studying, and his limited acquaintance with other literatures of the time that provide insight into the events he is studying, such as the Qumran and rabbinic corpuses³—all

* This review benefited from some comment made by Mr. Anthony Meyer.

¹ A small sample: 70, line 1: comma after the period (same in 403, 16 lines from bottom); 80, 9 lines from bottom: missing word "what"; 97, 17 lines from top: extra words "might include"; 150, 8 lines from top: "legions" should be "centuries"; 239, 15 lines from top: "Samaritans" should be "Samaritania"; 285, 10 lines from top: "neither was not" – double negative; 308, 10 lines from bottom: extra word "at"; 327, n. 122, second line from bottom: extra word "the" (same on page 425, 14 lines from bottom); 346, n. 49: needs to be "Merkaz le-mipuy" and 448, 12 lines from the bottom needs to be "berit" (see following note about inadequate knowledge in Hebrew); 385, n. 123: "in the rabbis" should be "in rabbinic literature"; 493, n. 97: instead of "n. 90" should be "n. 89"; 520, fig. 36: extra round bracket; 550, 3 lines from top: unnecessary word "using"; 595, left column, under Alexandre: "Guri-Rimon" is missing from bibliography.

² The author sprinkles the book with numerous references to the Hebrew language, ostensibly creating the impression of first-hand familiarity. But a closer look reveals a rickety foundation, the information mainly borrowed, mostly without reference, from other sources and incorporated into the book clumsily and incorrectly. Space will allow only a few examples: 407, note 7: the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek Dorkas is not

necessarily *tsvi* but more probably the feminine *tsviya*, like the Aramaic *tavita* as documented also in the Book of Acts (9:36); 447, note 54: the singular of *qann'aim* is not *qann'a* but rather *qann'ay* from the nominal pattern of artisans and personality traits (like *bann'ay* or *badd'ay*; an extension of the original pattern *qattal*); 552: the word *miqva'ot* is transliterated on the same page twice (lines 7 from top and 6 from bottom) but using two completely different methods of transliteration (obviously copying without attention or knowledge), the first one getting the suffix *alef* wrong. The author's unsound linguistic expertise in the regional languages also allows him to offer his vexing translations of *ioudaioi* (rendering the Hebrew *yehudim*) as Judaeans and not Jews (if so, it should have been the nonexistent *yehuda'im*), and of *zēlotai* as Disciples rather than the common *qanna'im*/zealots, two suggestions that would have registered utterly alien, not to say bizarre, to anyone familiar with the languages in the first century. The fact that the former suggestion stirred our scholarly environment in the last few years only testifies, in my view, how far (or how far down) the postmodern disregard for studying ancient languages and the availability of translations under any Internet-capable fingertip have taken us.

³ The same phenomena that were shown in the previous note apply here as well. In the numerous references he makes to rabbinic texts throughout the book, Mason almost never mentions the resource where he found them, creating the impression of first-hand knowledge and research capabilities in this material. However closer examination reveals that he is copying these references from secondary resources, many times without knowing what he is copying; see, for example 486, n. 77,

undermine the validity of this work. Those well-trained in the history of the revolt will find value in the questions Mason raises and in his provocative suggestions, even if only to reject them. Others, seeking a good and thorough presentation of this key moment in ancient history, will have to await for future, or revert to earlier, more solid discussions by others.

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where he snubs Jeremiah for a typo in a reference to the Mishnah and in the same note references himself the *Tosefta*, tractate Ketubbot while adding a meaningless number (279), which is not part of the reference but rather a page number to the old edition of Zuckerman; Mason himself never makes references to pages of modern critical editions, and had he wanted to do so here, the proper edition would be the updated one by Lieberman. Clearly it is a case of copying without understanding. Similarly on 444, n. 46, he ties the rabbinic text *Vayikra Rabba* to the Biblical book of Exodus (!), where every first-year student in rabbinics knows it refers to the book of Leviticus. The most essential rabbinic and Qumranic passages that relate to the war – such as the legendary stories about Yohanan ben Zakkai's escape from the besieged Jerusalem, the legal discussions regarding local land confiscated during the war by the Romans (which the early rabbis suggestively call *siqriqon*), or the numerous allusions to Messianism in the literature of Qumran and elsewhere – go completely unmentioned.