

Critically examine the aims and methods of Flavius Josephus and assess how reliable the resulting text is for our reconstruction of the Judean war.

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Flavius Josephus is one of the most controversial ancient historians and his account of the Judean revolt of 66–73 BC in *Bellum Judaicum* (hereafter *BJ*) is his earliest work, written after his arrival in Rome. Focusing on *BJ*, this essay will first examine the aims and methods of Josephus. I will then assess how reliable *BJ* is for our reconstruction of the events, using as case studies the siege and fall of Masada and the portrayal of Titus and his role in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. I will ultimately argue that, although his personality has been the subject of much debate, Josephus is a subtle historian, who often makes an effective use of irony. *BJ* therefore provides us with an invaluable, even if flawed and often self-serving, account of the events to which he directly participated.

When considering Josephus' aims in *BJ*, the easiest step is perhaps to start with what he sets to do in his prologue and take him to his words.

Firstly, the war between the Jews and the Romans is worth telling because it 'has been the greatest of all those, not only that have been in our times, but, in a manner, of those that ever were heard of, both of those wherein cities have fought against cities, or nations against nations'.¹ The conflict was of course important, involving four legions and parts of two additional ones, twenty infantry *cohortes*, eight equestrian *alae* and 18,000 men from four client kings (Antiochus of Commagene, Sohaemus of Emesus, Rabel of Nabataea and of course Agrippa II).² Yet, Josephus, echoing the

¹ Josephus. *BJ*. I.1.1.

² Millar 2005: 101. See also Le Bohec 2017: 418.

opening statement of Thucydides' Peloponnesian Wars³, undoubtedly overestimates the significance of an uprising which, although fundamental to the self-image and definition of the Flavian dynasty, was arguably a footnote of history and, in many ways, had far less definitive consequences for the Jewish nation than the second uprising of 132–135⁴. Secondly, Josephus contends that 'some men who were not concerned in the affairs themselves have gotten together vain and contradictory stories by hearsay' and that even 'those that were present have given false accounts...either out of humour of flattery to the Romans, or of hatred towards the Jews'⁵. Dismissing previous historical accounts as unreliable is a *topos* of ancient historiography⁶ and Josephus therefore unsurprisingly claims that he will, unlike his predecessors, 'prosecute the actions of both parties with accuracy'.⁷ Unlike his subsequent works (the Jewish Antiquities, the Against Apion and the Life, hereafter respectively *AJ*, *Ap.* and *Vita*), *BJ* deals with recent events and hence applies, like Herodotus and Polybius, the principle of *opsis* (autopsy).⁸ Josephus is a legitimate historian of the conflict, because of his involvement and experience as a general in Galilee. Thirdly, and more surprisingly for an ancient (as well as modern) historian⁹, Josephus acknowledges that he is not devoid of compassion for the fate of his nation and shall therefore 'suit [his] language to the passions [he] is under...and must be allowed to indulge some lamentations upon the miseries undergone by [his] own country'.¹⁰ Lastly, Josephus aims to identify the causes of the conflict, which he finds in the Thucydidean *stasis* created by the 'rebellious temper' of the *Sicarii*, brigands and 'tyrants among the Jews who brought the Roman power upon us, who unwillingly attacked us, and occasioned the burning of our holy temple'.¹¹

³ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*. I, 1, 1–2.

⁴ Brizzi 2017: 83 ; Tarel 2016: 84.

⁵ Josephus. *BJ*. I. 1, 2.

⁶ Marincola 2001: 15.

⁷ Josephus. *BJ*. I.4.9.

⁸ Marincola 2001: 130, 136–138 ; Pitcher 2009: 63.

⁹ Hadas–Lebel 1989: 247 ; Price 2011: 236.

¹⁰ Josephus. *BJ*. I.4.9.

¹¹ Josephus. *BJ*. I.4.10. See also Price 2011: 227.

Beyond those avowed aims and his claims, Josephus however pursues another, less explicit, agenda. His account of the revolt is also a way to exculpate himself from the accusation of betrayal, already raised by his Jewish contemporaries. Before surrendering to Vespasian at Jotapata, he prays and 'protest[s] openly that [he] does not go over to the Romans as a deserter of the Jews, but as a minister from [God]'.¹² Self-justification is of course not uncommon in ancient¹³ (as well as modern...) historiography but Josephus consistently blackens his rivals: Justus of Tiberias in *Vita* and John of Gischala in *BJ*.¹⁴ John is introduced and portrayed from the start as a villain, in a language which strikes the reader as less than objective: 'a treacherous person...His character was that of a very cunning and very knavish person, beyond the ordinary rate of the other men of eminence there, and for wicked practices he had not his equal anywhere....He was a ready liar, and yet very sharp in gaining credit to his fictions: he thought it a point of virtue to delude people...he was a hypocritical pretender to humanity, but where he had hopes of gain, he spared not the shedding of blood...he had a particular knack of thieving...'.¹⁵ Beyond himself, and as argued by Cohen, Josephus seeks to exonerate the Jewish aristocracy from its responsibilities in the revolt, without actually explaining (at least in *BJ*) why some members of this class, including himself, often initially fought the Romans.¹⁶ Josephus aims to send a message to his fellow Jews as to the need to accept Roman rule, as perhaps best expressed in the speech he puts in Agrippa's mouth¹⁷ or his own exhortation to his fellow Jews in front of Jerusalem's besieged walls: 'they must know the Roman power was invincible and that they had been used to serve them...for what part of the world is there that has escaped the Romans...? And evident it is that fortune is on all hands gone over to them'.¹⁸ The use of fortune

¹² Josephus. *BJ*. III. 8.354.

¹³ Gonzalez Echegaray 2012: 16.

¹⁴ Josephus. *Vita*. 65. Cohen 1979: 8.

¹⁵ Josephus. *BJ*. II, 21, 585–588.

¹⁶ Cohen 1979: 97, 100.

¹⁷ Josephus. *BJ*. II. 16. 345–401.

¹⁸ Josephus. *BJ*. V. 9. 365–367.

(*tychê*) is of course reminiscent of Polybius¹⁹ but Josephus goes one step further and assimilates it to God's will: 'God, when he had gone round the nations with this dominion, is now settled in Italy'.²⁰ Identifying Josephus's audience is in this context useful but seems a largely rhetorical exercise: *BJ* was probably intended for a combination of readers, from Rome²¹, the Jewish Greek-speaking diaspora²² and possibly even Parthia (although Rajak convincingly dismisses this view).²³

After having attempted to clarify his aims, we now turn to the historical and narrative methods used by Josephus to achieve them. *BJ*, probably an extensively reworked translation of an original work written by Josephus in Aramaic²⁴ is structured in seven books, covering the period from the taking of Jerusalem by Antiochus Epiphanes in 170 BC to the fall of Masada in 73 and the sedition of Jonathan in Cyrene. The quality of Josephus' Greek has been debated but *BJ* is in any case an example of revived Atticistic Greek²⁵, demonstrating the importance of form for Josephus. The style and tone of the last book is however different, suggesting that it might have been published under Domitian, unlike the previous books, likely to have been written during Titus' reign.²⁶ In addition to his own experience and the insider knowledge gained from his status as a priest and member of the Hasmonean family²⁷, Josephus states in *Vita* that his account of the war is based on the commentaries of the emperors and he makes extensive use of Strabo, the Maccabees and Nicolaus of Damascus.²⁸ *BJ* is a 'tragic' history in the Hellenistic tradition²⁹, perhaps best exemplified by the

¹⁹ Polybius, *Histories*. I. 1. 1–2.

²⁰ Josephus. *BJ*. V. 9. 367.

²¹ Mason 2005: 91.

²² Price 2005: 107.

²³ Rajak 1983: 183.

²⁴ Rajak 1983: 201.

²⁵ Mason 2005: 75.

²⁶ Barnes 2005: 140 ; Cohen 1979: 87; Rajak 1983: XIII.

²⁷ Mason 2016a: 24.

²⁸ Josephus. *Vita*. 342 and 358; Josephus *Ap.* 1.56. See also Gonzalez Echegaray 2012: 79.

²⁹ Rajak 1983: 9.

chilling story of the besieged and starved Mary, who ‘roasts’ and eventually eats her own baby.³⁰ This penchant for *pathos* (along with Josephus’ reliance on the work of Nicolaus)³¹ also possibly explains the disproportionate importance granted to the colourful figure of Herod in a chronicle of events occurring more than six decades after his death³² and the resulting imbalance of the work (whose books 1 and 2 alone constitute 42%).³³ *BJ* is consequently in many ways a “personalist” historiography, organized around characters and individuals.³⁴

To ensure the flow of his story, Josephus uses a variety of narrative techniques. Firstly, he recounts parallel events occurring simultaneously in both Israel and Rome, enabling a Roman audience to contextualize the facts.³⁵ He for instance mentions the revolt of Vindex against Nero in Galatia (IV.8.440), the arrival of Vitellius in Rome (IV.10.585), the conflict between Greeks and Jews at Antioch (VII.3.43–61; VII.5.107–112), the revolt of the Germans against the Romans (VII.4.75–88) and finishes with a digression on Antiochus, king of Commagene and the Alans (VII.7.219–251). Secondly, Josephus uses *prolepsis* (anticipation) and already announces in the prologue (I.1.28) that he will describe ‘how the temple was burned...the destruction...of the entire city..., what the Romans did to the remains of the wall; and how they demolished the strongholds that were in the country’.³⁶ This is also reinforced by the recourse to dreams and omens, in an almost Herodotian manner, even if they feature less prominently in *BJ* than in the *AJ*³⁷. This is for example evidenced by the story of the king of Cappadocia Archelaus and Glaphyra (II.7.112–116), the signs that precede the destruction of the Temple (VI.5.288–315) and perhaps even more strikingly by Josephus’ claim to have surrendered at Jotapata following a divinely-inspired dream (III.8.351). Thirdly, Josephus extensively exploits the traditional ancient historiography technique of both direct and indirect speeches. He hence puts

³⁰ Josephus. *BJ*. VI.3.208.

³¹ Villalba 1986: 81.

³² Feldman 2006: 424.

³³ Mason 2016a: 18.

³⁴ Villalba 1986: 69.

³⁵ Van Heuten and Huitink 2007: 225.

³⁶ Josephus. *BJ*. I. 1. 28–29. See Van Heuten and Huitink 2007: 216.

³⁷ Rajak 1983: 190 ; Villalba 1986: 60 and 252.

words in the mouths of Agrippa II, Titus, Eleazar and even himself, and I will come back to this later when discussing Masada.³⁸ Fourthly, Josephus provides extensive descriptions and chronological information. Dates and months are given according to both Jewish and Roman conventions³⁹: ‘in the twelfth year of the reign of Nero, and the seventeenth of the reign of Agrippa, in the month of Artemisius’, ‘on the eight day of the month Dios, in the twelfth year of the reign of Nero’ or ‘in the thirteenth year of Nero, on the first day of the month Panemus’.⁴⁰ *BJ* includes lengthy geographical details, especially about Jerusalem and its Temple⁴¹ and Josephus explains to his non-Jewish readers the feasts of the tabernacles (‘that feast whereon it is our custom for everyone to make tabernacles to God in the temple’) or Passover (‘when the [high priests] slay their sacrifices, from the ninth hour until the eleventh’).⁴² Josephus also describes at great length, this time presumably for his non-Roman readers, the Roman army, the setup of Roman camps⁴³ or the Flavian Roman triumph.⁴⁴

As a result, *BJ* simultaneously reflects and refers to Greek, Roman and Jewish historiographical canons. It is Greek historiography because of its recurring and deliberate recourse to the Greek *topoi* (inherited from Herodotus, Thucydides or Polybius) already mentioned above but also because Josephus, like his Jewish predecessor Philo, processes Jewish history under Greek lenses and ‘translates’ Jewish into Greek concepts. This is for instance most evidently the case of his use of the terms *sikaroi* and *lestrikoi*, to define for his audience the Jewish rebels, who he holds responsible for the revolt⁴⁵. Although Thackeray’s contention that Josephus worked with several Greek assistants who made a significant contribution to his writings has now been convincingly refuted by Rajak and

³⁸ See for instance Josephus. *BJ*. II.2.26–33 ; II. 16.345–401 ; VII.1. 6–12 and VII.8.323–388.

³⁹ Van Heuten and Huitink 2007: 214. Villalba 1986 : 118.

⁴⁰ Josephus. *BJ*. II.14.284 ; *BJ*. II.19.555 ; *BJ*.III.7.339.

⁴¹ Josephus *BJ*.V.4.136–182 and V.5.184–247.

⁴¹ Parente 2005: 45.

⁴² Josephus. *BJ*. VI.5.300 ; *BJ*.VI.9.423.

⁴³ Josephus. *BJ*.III.5 and 70–108 ; Roth 2016: 203.

⁴⁴ Josephus.*BJ*. VII.5.121–162 ; Eberhardt 2005: 259.

⁴⁵ Brizzi 2017: 7120; Lamour 2003: 64.

others⁴⁶, the influence of the language of Greek tragedy on the War is hard to deny. This broad intertextuality is perhaps most obvious in book III, which includes several references to Sophocles: the Jews fighting with “courage to arm them” or “desperately, without sparing either soul or body” (III.7.153) have thus been seen as echoes of *Elektra* (995–996 and 980).⁴⁷ *BJ* is however also the work of a Roman historian. This is first implicitly demonstrated in the prologue, where Josephus displays a characteristically ambiguous Roman view of the Greeks: ‘I may justly blame the learned men among the Greeks, who, when such great actions have been done in their own times, which, upon the comparison, quite eclipse the old wars, do yet sit as judges of those affairs, and pass bitter censures upon the labours of the best writers of antiquity; which modern, although they may be superior to them in the execution of what they intended to do....yet shall the real truth of historical facts be preferred by us, however much it be neglected among the Greek historians’.⁴⁸ Consequently perhaps, Josephus has been considered as a Roman propagandist and Flavian ‘lackey’ by many scholars such as Beard, Hadas–Lebel, Lamour, Laqueur or Vidal–Naquet⁴⁹, one of those “servants of the kings” portrayed by Yerushalmi⁵⁰. In the subsequent *Vita* (and in an unusual move in ancient historiography)⁵¹, Josephus indeed turns *BJ* into *the* version of events officially approved by the emperor: ‘Titus was so desirous that the knowledge of these affairs should be taken from these books alone that he subscribed his own hands to them and ordered that they should be published’.⁵² Josephus is however ultimately also one of the only representatives of a Jewish historiography, which rarely managed to find its place alongside the Bible and the rabbinic literature’s all-encompassing

⁴⁶ Rajak 1983: 233.

⁴⁷ Thackeray 2000: 75.

⁴⁸ Josephus. *BJ*. I.1, 13–16. See Mason 2016b: 101.

⁴⁹ Lamour 2003: 24 ; Mimouni 2012: 134 ; Tarel 2016: 15.

⁵⁰ Yerushalmi 2011: 21.

⁵¹ Hartog 2005: 254 ; Shuttleworth Kraus 2005: 183.

⁵² Josephus. *Vita*. 65 and 363.

focus on memory.⁵³ Josephus consistently portrays himself as a traditionalist Jew and contrasts his attitude to what he denounces as the impiety of Jewish rebels, and especially John of Gischala: 'John...turned to sacrilege and melted down many of the sacred utensils, which had been given to the temple' or put 'unlawful' food 'upon his table and...rejected those purifications that the law of his country had ordained'⁵⁴. The word *katheros* (clean, pure) is mentioned no less than 25 times in *BJ*⁵⁵ and Bohrmann has for example shown how Josephus upholds a traditional Jewish vision of war, only necessary if the integrity of the nation is threatened, which is, according to him, not the case under Roman rule.⁵⁶ In this respect, he appears unexpectedly similar to his contemporary, the founder of Yavne school and rabbinic Judaism, Jonathan ben Zakkai, who, according the Avvot of rabbi Nathan and the Gittin also escaped from a siege (Jerusalem in his case), met (and compromised with) Vespasian before predicting him the Roman empire.⁵⁷ Both Josephus and ben Zakkai are realists, who believe, following the Biblical prophets Daniel or Jeremiah (not explicitly mentioned in *BJ* but central to book X of *AJ*) that the Jews suffered at Roman hands because of the rebels' impiety: 'nor did [Jerusalem] so much deserve these sore misfortunes, as by producing such a generation of men as were the occasions of...its overthrow'.⁵⁸ For all those reasons, Josephus, a proud descendant of the Hasmoneans, has been controversially suspected of having conceived *BJ* to further his political ambitions, and even with the intent of potentially claiming for himself the throne of a Jewish kingdom.⁵⁹

⁵³ Schama 2014: 143 ; Yerushalmi 1984: 21.

⁵⁴ Josephus. *BJ*. V. 13. 562 ; *BJ*. VII. 8. 264.

⁵⁵ Regev 2011: 282.

⁵⁶ Bohrmann 1989: 123.

⁵⁷ Bohrmann 1989: 151 ; Mimouni 2012: 134.

⁵⁸ Josephus. *BJ*. VI. 8. 408. See Ferda 2013: 158 ; Lamour 2003: 99 ; Mimouni 2012: 136 and 485 ; Villalba 1986: 21.

⁵⁹ Josephus. *Vita*. I. 1. See Cohen–Matlofsky 2012: 1; Tuval 2011: 403.

Because Josephus' aims and methods are so often ambiguous, multifaceted and seemingly irreconcilable, Josephus' reliability as a historian has hence long been the subject of a heated debate. Scholars such as Atkinson, Cohen, Laqueur or Vidal–Naquet have thus dismissed his writings, including *BJ*, as 'historically inspired works of fiction'.⁶⁰ One of the main rationales behind this criticism lies in the significant differences and inconsistencies between the versions of events given by Josephus in *BJ* and *Vita*, above all regarding the nature of his mission as a general in Galilee.⁶¹ Despite all this, several historians such as Schürer, Thackeray and more recently Bilde, Bohrmann and Rajak have defended Josephus' accuracy and emphasised his validity as our (only extant) significant source on the events of the Jewish War, especially as Justus of Tiberias' possibly contradictory account unfortunately did not survive.⁶² I will therefore now attempt to consider Josephus' reliability as a historian using as case studies his description of the events at Masada (for which we now have archaeological evidence) and his portrayal of Titus and his responsibility in the burning and destruction of the Temple (for which we have alternative historical records).

The story of the siege and fall of the fortress of Masada, which virtually concludes *BJ* (VII.8.252–388 and 9. 389–406), has of course become a founding myth of Israel and the extensive archaeological excavations conducted by Yadin have transformed it an interesting test of Josephus' credibility.⁶³ According to Yadin, excavations show that "Josephus was right".⁶⁴ As pointed out regarding Gamla, Sepphoris, Tiberias or the temple of Jerusalem, many of Josephus' descriptions are seemingly vindicated by archaeological evidence.⁶⁵ The northern palace, with its three terraces, Roman–style baths and staircase leading from the middle to the lower terraces matches Josephus' account. The

⁶⁰ Atkinson 2011: 26. See also Cohen 1979: 86 ; Laqueur 1920: 126 ; Schwartz 2016: 421; Vidal–Naquet 1977: 13.

⁶¹ Cohen 1979: 7 ; Laqueur 1920: 56.

⁶² Bilde 1988; Bohrmann 1989: 172; Rajak 1983; Schürer 1890: 20768; Thackeray 2000: 14.

⁶³ Ben Yehuda 1995.

⁶⁴ Yadin 1966: 16.

⁶⁵ Kaden 2016: 258 ; Weiss 2016: 167.

rectangular structures found south of the palace are similar to the storehouses he described. The measurements of casemate walls and of the ramp appear to fit Josephus' figures and the discovery of ballistic stones lends credibility to Josephus' account of the Roman attack. Yadin goes even further and contends that two rather 'incredible' stories (the sudden downpour that filled the fortress' pits and saved from thirst Herod's brother Joseph when he was besieged at Masada as well as the changing winds that sent Roman arrows inwards) are actually vindicated by the location's geographical and weather conditions.⁶⁶ For all this, Yadin was hardly impartial and fails to explain convincingly the elements that do not reconcile with Josephus' account, and above all the fact that the second palace on the western side of Masada is not mentioned in *BJ*. This omission has been dismissed as unimportant, the result of Josephus' pragmatism and his desire to focus the action where events actually took place but could perhaps be more easily explained by the fact that Josephus was actually not present at Masada and thus had in this instance to rely on indirect sources.⁶⁷ The skeletons found within the fortress have been controversially interpreted by Yadin as the remains of the Jewish defenders who, according to Josephus, committed suicide at the end of the siege but archaeological evidence is currently insufficient to confirm this. Rajak is therefore probably right to assert that 'Josephus' narrative does not stand or fall with these identifications'⁶⁸ and it seems therefore necessary to go back to Josephus' text and the two successive speeches he attributes to Masada's commander Eleazar. As mentioned above, speeches are of course a common narrative device in ancient historiography and Josephus includes them to convey Eleazar's message rather than to offer a faithful rendition of his actual words. Eleazar inscribes his call for suicide within the 'laws of God himself' and the doctrine "corroborated" by 'our forefathers'.⁶⁹ Yet his arguments about the immortality of the soul sound firmly based on Greek dialectics and reminiscent of Plato or Philo's rhetoric, all presumably very foreign to the culture of the *Sicarii*, as is also the reference to

⁶⁶ Yadin 1966: 31, 33, 34, 41, 59, 87, 156.

⁶⁷ Hadas-Lebel 1995: 43 ; Shahr 2011: 356 ; Yadin 1966: 117, 141.

⁶⁸ Rajak 1983: 220.

⁶⁹ Josephus. *BJ*. VII. 8. 343.

‘those Indians who profess the exercise of philosophy’.⁷⁰ If Josephus has thus been able to distort Eleazar’s thoughts, did he then also invent the collective suicide?. This is what scholars such as Hadas–Lebel believe, especially since the siege of a city, followed by the suicide of the captives is a Greek and Roman *topos*, which Josephus might have sought to emulate, for ‘dramatic’ reasons and at the expense of historical truth.⁷¹ Ultimately, Josephus contradicts himself when it comes to both suicide (he earlier in *BJ* tries very hard to justify his decision not to commit suicide at Jotapata) and his presentation of Eleazar (an uncultured Zealot, whose death still seems quite admirable) but this is, according to van Heuten, precisely what might make the notion of collective suicide actually plausible.⁷²

If a study of Masada cannot formally confirm or infirm Josephus’ credibility, what can we learn from his portrayal of Titus, specifically his role in the burning and destruction of the Temple.? Thackeray indeed contends that Josephus’ pro–Roman bias (and consequently, lack of reliability) ‘appears above all in the eulogy of the hero Titus’.⁷³ According to Josephus, the fire that destroyed the temple was started by a Roman soldier and Titus unsuccessfully tried to stop it: ‘Caesar...ordered [the soldiers] to quench the fire. But they did not hear what he said, though he spoke so loud...nor did they attend to the signal he made with his hand neither...’.⁷⁴ Josephus’ account is however dubious (Parente contends that it is a ‘fabrication, from beginning to end’)⁷⁵ and arguably invalidated both by other external sources as well as by himself. Tacitus’ account of the siege of Jerusalem has unfortunately been lost but Sulpicius Severus and Orosius, who probably used it as a source, both

⁷⁰ Josephus. *BJ*. VII. 8.351. See Hadas–Lebel 1995: 61 ; Vidal–Naquet 1991: 70.

⁷¹ Hadas–Lebel 1995: 136 ; Vidal–Naquet 1991: 215.

⁷² Van Heuten 2007: 215.

⁷³ Thackeray 2000: 30.

⁷⁴ Josephus. *BJ*. VI. 4. 256–258.

⁷⁵ Parente 2005: 63.

contradict Josephus.⁷⁶ According to Severus, ‘Titus...summoned his advisers and deliberated whether to destroy such an enormous building as the Temple. Some of them considered it unwise that a consecrated shrine famous beyond all mortal constructions should be levelled with the ground, since its preservation would display proof of Roman reasonableness, while its demolition would constitute an unending mark of cruelty. Against this, however, others and Titus himself took the view that the Temple ought to be destroyed as a matter of urgency’.⁷⁷ Similarly, Orosius states that ‘after [the Temple] had been captured and he had admired its size and antiquity, [Titus] deliberated for a long time whether to burn it because it had inflamed the enemy or to preserve it as proof of his victory ... And so Titus, proclaimed emperor by the army, set fire to and demolished the Temple in Jerusalem’.⁷⁸ Cassius Dio finally writes that the superstitious Roman legionaries ‘did not immediately rush in but at last, under compulsion from Titus, ...made their way inside’.⁷⁹ Rabbinic sources also (although rather unsurprisingly) portray Titus as a profaner (who consorts with a prostitute within the Temple) and presents his early death as the result of a divine punishment, inflicted by a mosquito said to have entered his brain.⁸⁰ Most damningly perhaps, Josephus is inconsistent and contradicts himself, for instance when he acknowledges that Titus ‘gave orders that [the army] should now demolish the entire city and temple’.⁸¹ Ultimately, as for Masada, the verdict on Josephus’ portrayal is however not straightforward and there is no obvious reason to trust Severus, Orosius or Cassius Dio more than Josephus. Josephus’ portrayal of Titus is in fact in many ways less than flattering: the son of Vespasian applies the Roman virtue of *clementia* but, as documented by Hollander and McLaren, he is also far from the ideal Roman commander.⁸² He is unable to maintain the discipline of his troops and prevent the burning of the Temple but he also initially fails to position effectively the camp during the siege (*BJ.V.* 67–84, 275–287, 291–295, 479–485), first unsuccessfully tries to enter

⁷⁶ Barnes 2005: 134.

⁷⁷ Sulpicius Severus. *Chronica*. 2. 30. 6–7 (quoted in Barnes 2006: 135).

⁷⁸ Orosius. *Historiarum adversus paganos libri*. VII.7. 9. 5–6 (quoted in Barnes 2006: 135).

⁷⁹ Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*. 66, 6.2 (quoted in Pucci Ben Zeev 2011: 54)

⁸⁰ Hadas-Lebel 2012: 138–142.

⁸¹ Josephus. *BJ*. VII.1.1.

⁸² Den Hollander 2014: 190–197 ; McLaren 2005: 279.

Jerusalem through a breach in the wall that is too narrow (*BJ*.V. 331–341) and is repeatedly duped, for instance by John of Gischala (*BJ*.IV. 92–116) or the defenders of Jerusalem (*BJ* V.109–114; 318–329). The graphic details of the many atrocities committed by the Roman army under his orders can also hardly be seen as an unambiguous advertisement for the later emperor, and might therefore indirectly prove the accuracy of Josephus' narrative.⁸³

More generally then, Josephus is neither a paragon of historiographical virtue nor a consummate liar. When read 'between the lines'⁸⁴, *BJ* undoubtedly provides us with the means to reconstruct the Judean War. First, the integrity of the text itself, unlike other ancient texts, appears to have been preserved⁸⁵ and, because it is the only extant record of the uprising, its accuracy can only be judged by 'deconstructing' Josephus' intents, a difficult exercise bound to lead to unfounded inferences. The inconsistencies between *BJ* and *Vita* are of course an important help to our reconstruction process but the type of *Quellenforschung* performed by Laqueur or Cohen also has its limitations. The *Vita* is a confused, apologetic work, written with more hindsight and as a polemic against Justus of Tiberias. Despite the chronological differences and a divergent presentation of Josephus' responsibilities as a commander of Galilee, it does not however constitute a fundamentally different view of the conflict between the Jews and Romans and consequently does not by itself discredit Josephus' initial (and main) account in *BJ*. Secondly, Josephus is the product of an elite: Appian and him are characteristically among the only ancient historians to clearly mention and express their status.⁸⁶ He thus (unavoidably?) provides us with a partial view: his interpretation of the Judean war includes the 'goods' (his own social class), the 'villains' (the rebels or brigands and, to a much lesser extent, several bad Roman governors) and even some conspicuous absents (the women, reduced to only marginal appearances). Josephus is selective and modern historians have now duly offered other,

⁸³ Gruen 2011: 157. See for instance Josephus. *BJ*. III: 298–305, 329–331 ; V.289, 449–451 ; VII.23 and 37–39.

⁸⁴ Mason 2003: 559.

⁸⁵ Feldman 2006: 336

⁸⁶ Lachenaud 2004: 1624.

conflicting explanations for the origins of the revolt, whether the struggle for legitimacy within the Jewish ruling elite⁸⁷, the irreconcilable differences between Jewish identity and the Greek–Roman world⁸⁸ or a combination of political and social structural reasons.⁸⁹ For all this, any historiographical effort is by nature the outcome of the historian’s choices⁹⁰ and Josephus’ interpretation is therefore no more but also probably no less reliable than that of other (ancient or modern) historians. Reading Josephus as a ‘post–colonial’ writer who attempts a ‘reconstruction of the past’ and records (what Wachtel famously named in another context) the ‘view of the vanquished’⁹¹ in fact enhances his credibility. Like Polybius⁹² and Aelius Aristides⁹³, his attitude towards Roman rule is marked by irony⁹⁴ and ‘covert criticism’⁹⁵. Temporarily accepting Roman rule does not mean approving it: ‘this account I have given the reader not so much with the intention of commending the Romans, as of comforting those that have been conquered by them’.⁹⁶ This approach is further demonstrated by Agrippa’s speech, which clearly states that the Romans rule, but only for *now*.⁹⁷

As a conclusion, *BJ* deserves to be read as an engaging and (in all meanings of the word) unique account of seminal events. The complex and ambiguous personality of Josephus and his undeniable pursuit of self–justification have profoundly tainted both his writings and largely explain the severe judgment of many modern historians. Paradoxically perhaps, I will however contend that any assessment regarding *BJ*’s reliability and Josephus as a historian should attempt to leave aside what

⁸⁷ Goodman 1987.

⁸⁸ Brozzi 2017: 7052.

⁸⁹ Mimouni 2012: 434/454; Schwartz 2014: 77.

⁹⁰ Finley 1986: 53, 61.

⁹¹ Cohen 2017: 94 ; Wachtel 1971 : 98.

⁹² Gruen 2011: 149.

⁹³ Veyne 2005: 244.

⁹⁴ Barclay 2005a: 36 and 2005b: 315.

⁹⁵ Rajak 1983: xv

⁹⁶ Josephus. *BJ*. III.5.108.

⁹⁷ Kaden 2011: 505 ; Price 2011: 241.

we know about Josephus the man. Acknowledging the flaws of the man and even considering him as a 'traitor' does not imply that Josephus is a 'bad' historian or his writings fictions. Our knowledge of his life as well as the context of his narrative, now supplemented by archaeological evidence from Masada and elsewhere, should on the contrary encourage us to continue probing *BJ*, which, like most historical works, certainly contains some (deliberate or unconscious) lies but also a good deal of invaluable factual evidence.

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