

Tessa Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society*. London: Duckworth (U.S. publisher: Fortress Press, Philadelphia), 1983, pp. x + 245.

A new book on Josephus need hardly be justified. Scholars of this troublesome historian and of the Second Temple period have worked without even an imperfect consensus on the proper use of Josephus' works as historical sources — above all *BJ*, with which the present work is primarily concerned. Basic problems, such as Josephus' use of language and sources, his literary techniques, or intellectual influences on his writing, await full and authoritative treatment (cf. L.H. Feldman's new critical bibliography for a fuller list of *desiderata*). Moreover, as Rajak points out, Josephus scholars often as not fail to examine "received opinions and inherited assumptions." Interpretations (often politically motivated) of Josephus' themes and methods have abounded in the absence of firm controls; and, although smaller problems have been attacked with various degrees of success, no unified theory or reliable methodology has been established (but see the recent sound treatment of Josephus' *vita* by S.J.D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome* [1979]).

Rajak faces head-on the central problem in *BJ*, viz., how to extract a good history of the war from an inherently biased and distorted account written by an important and self-interested participant. Her commendable approach is to put Josephus in context, to understand *BJ* as the expression of a first-century Jew who, because of his high position in a deeply troubled and factious society, had to deal with conflicting responsibilities; reluctantly took a leading role in an impossible war; and, transplanted to Rome, wrote a history marked at once by self-conscious adherence to an acquired historiographical tradition and a persistent Jewish commitment. A thorough evaluation of Josephus along these lines is indeed required. Josephan research has been dominated by *Quellenforschung*, with not altogether clear results. Rajak shifts the emphasis entirely, attempting "to relate [Josephus'] writings to their social and political environment" (p. 6); this promises to be a productive line of inquiry. The result here is a highly sympathetic reading of Josephus: *BJ* is not a big unpatriotic lie, Flavian propaganda, mendacious apology or vituperative slanders against personal or class enemies, but a serious history which, so long as its particular point of view is recognized, can be trusted on most points. We are eager to be convinced.

The argument begins with a description of Josephus' elite priestly origins, his Jewish education, and the major influences on his development, particularly his visit to Rome (c. 1). The point is to stress Josephus' deep ties to country and religion. Few will argue, although the historian is believed on matters which are often doubted, e.g., his pedigree, and his experiments with all three Jewish sects and instruction by a desert ascetic. A study of Josephus' Greek (c. 2) finds that he knew the language well enough to "collaborate fruitfully" with his assistants, but his acquaintance with Greek culture was rather shallow when he arrived in Rome after the war. The focus then shifts (cc. 3–5) to a close analysis of *BJ*. Josephus is seen to have largely approved of Roman rule until inept and cruel procurators hastened the breakdown of order and estranged

“respectable Jews”; the rebellion could have been averted at the last minute. Rajak, distancing herself only slightly from the text, wholly accepts these conclusions, which are nonetheless explained as “the product of [Josephus] position within Palestinian society.” The interpretation offered is essentially a restatement: Josephus hates the rebels and fails to understand them, partly because of their lower social origins; prophets and messiahs fall into the same group; all are Josephus’ political adversaries. For Josephus, the war was as much a civil conflict as rebellion against the Romans, thus the prominence of *stasis* (the religious implications of which are handled well). We are assured that *BJ* gives a “full and realistic picture.” The “uninstitutionalized leaders” of small groups prevalent in Judaea had no direct connection with the revolt; Josephus’ presentation of the clash between two Jewish classes is affirmed. A very good economic survey of Palestine from Herod to 66 C.E., marked by skepticism of recent treatments, finds “real economic trouble” during the 20 years before the outbreak of the war. Next, Josephus in Galilee (c. 6): the contradictory accounts in *BJ* and *Vita* can be made to conform to a smooth and consistent picture of a hesitating general torn between loyalties and struggling with an impossible task. The seventh chapter and the eighth (and perhaps best) argue in turn that neither the lost Aramaic nor our Greek *BJ* was meant to convey Flavian propaganda. The Aramaic was sent out for “those who were interested,” and the preoccupation with Jewish concerns in our *BJ* overshadows the clearly propagandistic sections, which are a “detachable part” of the history.

The most noteworthy achievement of this book is the attempt to define Josephus’ place in Graeco-Roman historiography. Echoes of ancient authors, historiographical conventions, and pagan philosophical terms and concepts have been discovered before, but their full meaning is not yet understood. Rajak’s contribution is suggestive, not exhaustive, but future researchers will do well to heed her effort not only to identify Josephus with his adopted traditions, but to distinguish him from them. Josephus’ failure to master the language and conventions he learned, and to reconcile Graeco-Roman culture with Jewish values, led to awkwardness. Thus his confusing assertions on fate and history, about which Rajak remarks: “Perhaps it is because he was originally a stranger to Graeco-Roman historiography that he could become over-concerned with following, at different times, one convention or another, rather than seeking some sort of resolution between form and content” (p. 102) (see also her article in *JJS* 33 [1982]). Josephus struggled to feel comfortable. Yet the Jewish elements can be overstated. Josephus is decidedly not “a product of Palestinian Hellenism” (p. 64). Most of Josephus’ Hellenism, by Rajak’s own account, was acquired in Rome. Through ardent admiration and imitation of Greek and Latin literature, Josephus strove to become a part. He did not in the process forget his Judaism, but whereas the rabbis hesitated and stepped back from the edge, Josephus plunged in.

Rajak is somewhat less successful in her larger purpose. We are promised in the subtitle “the historian and his society.” Yet aspects of Josephus’ society are discussed

haphazardly, only as needed to make other points, and no coherent picture emerges (which is a shame for the general reader); and no attempt at all is made to describe the Rome where Josephus lived most of his life and did all of his writing. As for “the historian,” the treatment is unhappily limited. Rajak announces that she is “mainly concerned with Josephus’ early life and writings” (p. 6), i.e., *BJ*. This restriction would be defensible in a book with less grand purposes, but Rajak has intended to interpret *BJ* broadly and to stress Josephus’ lasting commitment to Judaism. For both these ends, *AJ*, receiving scant attention, is crucial. Furthermore, even an examination confined exclusively to *BJ* should not entirely neglect Book 1, as this study does. For even a general reader might ask why a history of the Jewish War should begin with the Maccabean revolt and how Josephus chose material and elaborated themes in this substantial pre-history. We are not asking for a different book. Rajak has set out to teach us about Josephus: his social and intellectual background — surely his portrayal of the Hasmoneans is relevant; his methods — how does the historiography of Book 1 compare with that of Books 2–7?; his themes — *stasis* looms large in Book 1; his place in Graeco-Roman historiography — did he write Book 1 because a Thucydidean “archaeology” was required?; his personal historical vision — the portrayal of Jews under earlier Roman rule is essential. Thus Rajak treats only one facet of the historian: Josephus the eye-witness and interpreter of modern events. Now Josephus was a good enough student to defend an occupation in contemporary history, but he spent most of his life after the war writing ancient history, for which the raw material was of a different nature altogether. What was his broader view of history, and how did he work with written sources? Rajak’s opinions are missed (notwithstanding the odd statement that the pro-Flavian slant in the digressions on Vespasian’s rise to power was “due as much to the author’s source as to any deliberate argument on his part” [p. 215] up to that point Rajak had argued incisively that *BJ* was written with strong purpose and decided views).

Rajak’s neglect of *AJ* and *BJ* 1 may have resulted from her decision to trust Josephus’ view that the revolt was avoidable and had no deep roots. The extreme revolutionaries are portrayed as lawless bands forming spontaneously for criminal purposes; they are all lumped together into one shapeless group and condemned as *leistai*. The Jews had become “two nations” divided along economic lines, the rebels coming from the lower half. Thus Josephus-Rajak. Yet researchers have tended to distrust Josephus’ portrait of the rebels and have discovered widely different origins and purposes (e.g., M. Stern in *The World History of the Jewish People* VIII). Moreover, that the rebels are to be identified with the lower classes is a common assumption accepted without hesitation by Rajak, who, despite her scorn for scholarly trends, relies perhaps too heavily on Hengel. We know from Josephus’ own record of tacit or active support by members of the upper class, and there are reasons to suspect even greater involvement (see Cohen, *op. cit.*, c. 6). Josephus’ bi-polar view of Jewish society also obscures the fact that the ruling class itself was tragically divided. The whole picture is far more complex than what appears on the surface of Josephus’

text. Many aspects of the rebellion are simply irretrievable, such as the extent to which messianic or apocalyptic expectations motivated the Jews to start the war and persevere to the end. Rajak provides a sensible discussion of prophets, but, reflecting Josephus' unconcern or scorn for religious motives, declares that "Messianism does not appear to figure very largely" (p. 140). We just do not have enough information to decide. Silences can often deceive more effectively than outright lies, and our suspicions are aroused by the fact that Josephus waited in his narrative until after the burning of the Temple to expatiate on prophecies and messiahs (cf. W. Weber, *Josephus und Vespasian* [1921], 41ff.).

The truth behind the epithet *leistes* may also be only partly recoverable. Josephus uses this word to obscure not only the rebels' motives but also their real measure of popular support. Rajak defends the accuracy of the term as "correct on a technical level." This may be true, but does not help answer the more interesting question of exactly how Josephus employed this strong word. The use of the term in *BJ* is irregular: sometimes all the rebels in Jerusalem are called *leistai*, sometimes the term is reserved for specific groups; John of Gischala is quite inaccurately called a *leistes*, as Rajak notices (p. 84). All this needs to be sorted out and explained in the wider context of brigandage in antiquity, which has so far been studied only piecemeal (see now B.D. Shaw in *Past and Present* 105 [1984], although Judaea is deliberately not discussed; also B. Isaac in *HSCP* 88 [1984]).

A more rigorous approach would not have lost the general reader, who may in fact be misled by some of Rajak's assertions. For example, the evidence from other written sources contradicting Josephus is dismissed as "not, on the whole, such as to inspire any great confidence" (p. 104), nothing more said. Yet many scholars find significance, e.g., in Cassius Dio's report that Romans deserted to Jews (66.5.4; cf. *BJ* 5.268) or that Jewish deserters secretly corrupted the Roman water supply and even killed Roman soldiers (66.5.3). In a similarly casual manner, Rajak dispenses with parts of *BJ* itself. Thus she does present some good arguments that *BJ*'s central purpose is not Flavian propaganda (cc. 7–8), but Josephus poses his own obstacles, not least his explanation that his famous digression on the Roman army was written "to console the vanquished and to deter others from revolting" (*BJ* 3.108). This inconvenience is facilely dismissed as a historiographical convention and "an isolated statement, and at no other point does Josephus say anything comparable" (p. 180). But elsewhere Rajak believes that form does not dictate content (p. 36), and, more seriously in a work striving to believe Josephus, the (arguable) uniqueness of the historian's statement does not prove that he did not mean it.

Josephus has been caught in untruths, distortions, half-truths, flatteries; he even admits to emotional coloring in his history (*BJ* 1.9–12). Distrust of Josephus annoys Rajak, yet she provides no sure way of evaluating a biased historian and his history when the historian is the sole provider of information. Rajak recognizes the conundrum and responds cheerfully: "there is no logical fallacy, if what is offered is not a strict argument which is to stand as proof, but, rather, a proposal for putting together

the pieces in a multi-dimensional puzzle" (p. 107). Such optimism is a pleasure to find, but no substitute for sound methodology, that is, a "strict argument." Rajak does repeatedly insist that we must believe Josephus' information if it is "possible" (p. 16) or "realistic" (p. 107) or "makes sense" (p. 106). Yet even if we were unqualifiedly to accept this approach, the problems of gaps and suppressions would remain.

A book of this nature will be sought out by both general and scholarly readers. Despite some technical digressions and three appendices (Josephus' native language, the assistant theory, and the dates of *AJ* and *Vita*), the work remains accessible. Less felicitous was the decision not to include a bibliography, which will hurt both intended audiences. Not only a list but a brief survey of scholarship would have served the author's purpose of "clearing away old notions." A list of references to Josephus' works, as well as a more reliable index, would have been useful. Also, the author has been done a great disservice by her publishers, who are now marketing a book marred by numerous typographical errors and careless editing. One wonders whether factual errors, which it was not the purpose of this review to catalogue, are merely the result of sloppy editing. For example, Eleazar ben Simon is said to be the priest who stopped the sacrifices for the Roman emperor (p. 134), but Rajak knows this was really Eleazar ben Ananias (p. 129). And surely she also knows that Caligula did not actually get his statue put in the Temple (p. 123, n. 53).

Rajak looks into Josephus' text and finds true history where others find distortions and inventions. Another voice is welcome, and hers is to a certain degree original; but her treatment is more impressionistic than thorough, and she has not given us better reason to believe her rather than more negative critics. This book provides a very good description of Josephus' view of the Jewish War, but a much less clear picture of the war itself.

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Gaius, *Institutiones*. Traducere, studiu introductiv, note si adnotari de Aurel N. Popescu. Editura Acad. RSR., București, 362 pp.

This first translation and critical edition of Gaius' *Institutiones* into Romanian — accompanied by an introductory study, notes and summary, all produced in a remarkably attractive form — marks an outstanding cultural achievement in Romanian classical studies. The translation and commentary reveal a great amount of care and devotion.