JEWS VERSUS GREEKS AND ROMANS

DeSilva (D.A.) *Judea under Greek and Roman Rule*. Pp. viii + 204, ills. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. Paper, £16.99, US$24.95 (Cased, £71, US$110). ISBN: 978-0-19-026325-6 (978-0-19-026324-9).

Marcone (A.) (ed.) *Giudeofobia nell'Impero romano?* (Studi sul Mondo Antico 21.) Pp. viii + 353, ills, map. Milan: Le Monnier Università, Mondadori, 2024. Paper, €35. ISBN: 978-88-00-86523-4.

Mason (S.) *Jews and Christians in the Roman World. From Historical Method to Cases*. (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 116.) Pp. x + 691, ills. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2023. Cased, €190. ISBN: 978-90-04-54387-4.

Tobolowsky (A.) *Israel and its Heirs in Late Antiquity.* Pp. iv + 65. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025. Paper, £17. ISBN: 978-1-009-39291-4.

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The Jews of antiquity regularly led out their lives as subjects, dependents or subalterns of greater powers or empires. They are footnotes in the grand sweep of ancient history that records the narratives of Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, Rome and Parthia. Yet they hold a place of prominence well out of proportion to their direct influence, largely due to the sway of our surviving evidence, notably the Hebrew Bible, the writings of Josephus, the Talmuds, the New Testament and the Church Fathers. Those sources give a centrality to the Jewish experience that no other subordinate peoples of antiquity have enjoyed. Hence the scholarly literature on Jews or Judaeans in the realms of imperial powers is enormous and continues to proliferate, a skewed perspective but an inevitable imbalance. The books under review reflect an ongoing, even burgeoning, interest.

This also raises a troubling methodological question: Can one extrapolate broader conclusions about the circumstances of subaltern societies from the special situation of one people whose historiography happens to put them centre stage? The books considered here do not explore the potential ramifications. That is not their mission. Indeed, although they all engage with the topic of Jews under the hegemony of ruling powers, they represent different genres with different goals. DeSilva's *Judea under Greek and Roman Rule* is a relatively compact survey of that large subject aimed primarily at non-specialists, a sober and convenient treatment that does not profess to break new ground. The imposing volume by Mason, *Jews and Christians in the Roman World*, contains a collection of twenty of his previously published articles and two new ones, loosely arranged under headings conjured up to supply some coherence. Marcone's compilation of fifteen essays, *Giudeofobia nell'Impero romano?*, has greater coherence, for it grows out of a conference held in Rome in 2023 devoted to this subject. The short monograph, *Israel and its Heirs in Late Antiquity*, by Tobolowsky, represents yet another genre, a brief but original take on a subject usually

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treated in a much more extended fashion. Thus, the objectives and the means of these works vary markedly. And common threads are relatively few. But there are issues of significance touched upon in one or more of these books that warrant notice.

What characterised Jews in the eyes of their pagan contemporaries – or indeed in their self-perception? The volume on 'Judeophobia' addresses the central question of whether the Jewish people drew fire as an ethnic group, dependent on bloodline, descent and genealogy, or as a people distinguished by alien customs, ritual and practices. Marcone, in his contribution to the assemblage of pieces, asserts that gentile notions of Jews eschewed racial connotations, a strictly modern feature of discourse (pp. 5–7, 11–12). M. Ravallese's article finds that the contrasting portraits of Jews by Tacitus and Josephus have an important commonality in stressing Jewish differences from Roman social practices and expectations, a negative element for the one, a positive element for the other. But neither hostility nor fear prevented continuing Jewish practices, adherence to ancestral laws and even acquisition of Roman citizenship (pp. 45–8, 61–3). Racial characteristics were irrelevant. By contrast, A. Angius, although acknowledging that the predominance of testimony speaks of cultural distinctions, calls attention to a significant number of texts that suggest racial determinants (pp. 109–12, 118–27). A balance of considerations may be the more appropriate conclusion. W. Eck rightly notes that the ascription by Latin authors of the term *superstitio* did not confine itself to Jews, and that Roman suzerainty allowed for the continuation of Jewish privileges, maintenance of their lifestyle, internal autonomy and preservation of their convictions. The very concept of hostility to Jews as a people, whether ethnically or culturally defined, is thus put in question (pp. 305–7, 310, 316–24).

The entire matter is broadened by the general reflections of G. Geraci, who presses on the issue of terminology. What exactly is 'Judeophobia'? The conflation of labels like 'antisemitism', 'anti-judaism', 'xenophobia', 'Judeophobia' and 'misoxenia', without sharp definitions or distinctions, has troubled the endeavour. The overlap of hate and fear (*misos* and *phobos*) adds to the confusion (pp. 325–7). And, more importantly, a methodological matter clouds the whole enterprise. Geraci rightly quotes N. de Lange in stating that research into the distant origins of antisemitism does not entail the assumption that antisemitism existed in the ancient world; these are two quite different matters (p. 333). That caveat, however, is not generally followed in this collection – or elsewhere. The search for the ancient roots of antisemitism is too often prompted by presentist considerations, which do more to distort than to clarify.

The troublesome character of terminology in dealing with Jewish experience in imperial contexts exercises several of the authors in this volume. In addition to disputes about the meaning of Judeophobia, other terminological issues plague scholars of this subject. If Jews are adjudged as an identifiable group, does that make them a *phylon*, an *ethnos*, a *laos* or a *genos*? Each of these designations appears in assorted texts, but what exactly do they signify, do they have precise and consistent meanings, or does the variety suggest imprecision? Marcone recognises the problem but does not resolve it (p. 4). Angius treats the matter strictly in connection with the debate over whether the sources refer to ethnic or cultural perceptions of Jews (pp. 112–19). Ravallese prefers to cite P. Schäfer on complex and diverse renderings of Judeophobia, whether as hostility or fear, a combination of criticism and respect, attraction and revulsion (p. 63). This may do less to clarify than to muddle. More problematic still is the modern term 'pogrom'. It appears frequently in modern discussions to describe the horrific assault on Jews in Alexandria in 38 CE. The designation, however, belongs primarily to the persecution of Jews at the hands of Czarist Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whether it is applicable to the special, even unique, circumstances of the mixed population of Greeks, Egyptians and Jews in Alexandria under the rule of a Roman prefect is most dubious. Use of the term

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by G. Lauri (pp. 74–5, 86), who acknowledges its problematic character, hinders rather than advances our understanding of that dramatic but highly complex episode.

The principal source of friction and even the origins of antisemitism have often been found in the history of Jews in Egypt. L. Capponi, an expert on that history, contributes a valuable piece to the Marcone volume on Judeophobia. She rightly casts doubt on the thesis that animus between Egypt and the Jews can be traced back to the Pharaonic period, a hostility promoted by Egyptian priests, reinforced by later Hellenistic-Egyptian literature, which revised the story of the Exodus, culminated in the Julio-Claudian period by the oppression and persecution in Alexandria, and resurfaced in the diaspora revolt under Trajan, which included uprisings in Egypt. Capponi is too good a historian to buy that narrative wholesale, as she has shown in other writings, but here she basically conveys the standard line without much deviation (pp. 91–103). A more nuanced view of Egyptian 'Judeophobia' would have been welcome.

A longstanding debate has been central to the discussion of the subject of ancient antisemitism. Did it even exist in the pre-Christian period, or was it a creation of the coming of Christianity? Marcone sets out the contours of the debate in the introductory piece to his collection (pp. 3–4), but does not develop this point. Geraci offers a useful summary of major treatments and scholarly opinions (pp. 327–35), but the differences in this pivotal dialectic and the arguments on each side get short shrift. The chapter by E. Capannolo alludes to it. But her discussion, although it distinguishes between Graeco-Roman animosity towards Jews and Christian antijudaism, does not elaborate on that distinction. She sees the latter, rightly enough, as a means whereby early Christians sought to define themselves through both an appropriation of the Hebrew Bible and a distancing from it. Their focus on the Scriptures rested largely on those segments wherein the Israelites fell from divine grace and suffered appropriate punishment. Her analysis of texts such as the *Letter of Barnabas*, Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*, Tertullian and the *Epistle to Diognetus*, illustrates Christian efforts to demonstrate separation from and superiority to Jews. But she leaves open the question of whether this counts as hatred of Jews or as a critique of their religion (pp. 170–84). Capannolo does not enter the debate on whether Christianity inaugurated the thrust towards Judeophobia. The absence of that tortured issue leaves a notable gap in the collection.

Ethnicity as a mode of identifying ancient Jews – and indeed Christians – is the topic of Tobolowsky's small but arresting book. He makes a vigorous case for the fluidity and manipulability of the concept. His monograph's principal concern is the tradition of '*verus Israel*', i.e. the mode with which early Christians saw themselves as derived from but moved beyond ancient Israel. This became especially tricky in the stress on ethnicity as an element in the connection, for it suggested a biological descent that Christians could not and would not claim. Tobolowsky instead speaks of an 'abiological strategy' and sees it as a construct that could both affirm a legitimate descent and emphasise a critical advance beyond it. He is certainly right not only to label this construct a strategy but to insist that it is *just* a strategy, not a fundamental appeal to a shared ethnicity. Biological descent in this context is indeed more a rhetorical claim than a reality (pp. 2–8). That holds true as much for the Jews' own sense of identity as for Christian efforts to build upon it. Boundary-making was a pervasive tool, illustrated perhaps most notably by Samaritans eager to share a tradition with but stress a distinction from Jews (pp. 22–34). But, as Tobolowsky insists, it is just one of many strategies designed to manufacture group identity. A claim on ethnicity as a bonding device carries no monolithic meaning, but is readily moulded with varied contents and varied implications. The Christian claim on Abraham as ancestor has the linkage take place even before the advent of the Israelites (pp. 47–8). Tobolowsky repeatedly and importantly insists upon the creativity and inventiveness of ancient writers in the ascription

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of ethnic identity to themselves and to others. It is precisely the agency of writers who inherited traditions and turned them into new forms and narratives that constituted the dynamism of the constructs (pp. 19, 36, 52, 55–6). No need to quarrel with any of that. But it comes as a surprise that Tobolowsky sees this interpretation of malleable and shifting ethnic identities as something different from standard orthodoxy on the subject (p. 3). Fluidity of ethnic identities and their reconstruction by inventive minds with their own agendas has been the prevailing interpretation by the academy for several decades.

A most common charge against Jews by their gentile neighbours, outside the question of nature or nurture, was that they kept too strictly to themselves. They shunned or scorned others, an anti-social and misanthropic crowd that did not allow themselves to mingle with those of different beliefs and lifestyles, and thus engendered anti-Jewish animosity. That presumption is taken up by a noteworthy essay on *amixia* in Mason's collection. He effectively draws attention to the striking paradox that criticism of Jews stressed their self-willed isolation on the one hand, but expressed great discomfort with their willingness to welcome converts on the other. How to explain the flagrant inconsistency? Mason takes up the question and valuably examines usage of *amixia* in both Graeco-Roman and Jewish sources (pp. 29–52). He does not fully resolve the contradiction. It is worth underscoring the fact that the ancient Jews themselves saw no conflict between these attitudes. A tenacious Jewish commitment to the superiority of their own traditions and the maintenance of their special character (a different matter from misanthropy) could go hand in hand with the encouragement of converts to share them (a different matter from proselytism).

Methodology is a repeated concern for Mason in almost all his work, thus adding a vital element to his contribution on any subject. In his assemblage of selected *kleine Schriften*, Mason reminds us more than once of methodological considerations. As might be expected of a historian, his concern is, first and foremost, with the writing of history. He makes a telling point in the introduction to his assemblage of essays. Historians (especially those of antiquity) regularly operate on the principle of querying the accuracy of our sources and proceeding to follow those deemed most accurate. But as Mason observes, that can be a misguided endeavour. He reminds us of what any serious historian knows, that 'accuracy' is a loaded word, ascribed by historians to sources that support a picture that they find plausible and defensible. That does not mean that the past is an arbitrary construct by subsequent researchers. Rather, it must be pieced together through careful and laborious examination of limited, often flawed, testimony, combined with the researcher's questioning acumen, ingenuity and creative thinking, rather than reliance on what we judge to be 'accurate' narratives (p. 8). Mason warns also of the necessity to apply terms and categories as understood by the ancients rather than to impose our classifications and structures (pp. 16, 417). That is salutary advice from perhaps the pre-eminent scholar of Josephus of his generation. Josephan studies lend themselves most readily to investigations of accuracy, reliability and the imposition of predetermined dispositions. And Mason provides occasional reminders of the difficulties faced by historical research on the ancient world. In writing about Paul for example, he admonishes us not to be led astray by some illusory search for an objective portrait, since (as all historians know) facts do not speak for themselves but require an active and inventive mind to sort them out and produce a convincing construct (pp. 407, 409).

The articles in Mason's collection turn, unsurprisingly, again and again to Josephus. But larger issues loom behind that dominant figure. Mason includes an intriguing paper on Jewish historiography. He raises the important question of what constitutes Jewish historiography in the ancient world. Was there such a genre? Alas, Mason does not supply a satisfactory answer. Josephus remains his lodestar. A whole array of Jewish historians were active in the Graeco-Roman era, most of them writing in Greek but drawing on biblical

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material. Mason is aware of them, even records the names of many of them (pp. 153–4), but he is not interested in pursuing them. To be sure, many of these authors are mere names to us or exist only in fragments quoted by later writers. But they attest to a lively and engaging activity that occupied Jewish intellectuals for centuries before Josephus. Are there common threads, standards, objectives or expectations? In short, was there such a thing as Jewish historiography? Mason addresses the question but does not offer an answer (pp.153, 160). One naturally asks whether the writing of history by Jews working within their own sacred traditions qualifies as a separate genre. And how far, if at all, does it fall within the bounds of Greek historiography – or indeed Near Eastern historiography. These matters warrant closer scrutiny – and a different research agenda.

The topics treated in the books under review are of high interest to scholars and students inquiring about the nature of Jewish history under the aegis of imperial powers. Matters like ethnicity, antisemitism, adherence to tradition in hostile or oppressive conditions, and the construction of historical narrative by a subaltern community all receive scrutiny in one or more of these works. DeSilva's study of Judea under Greek and Roman rule belongs in a different category. His is a sweeping, though concise and readable, survey of Jewish experience in that era. DeSilva is fully aware of the motifs and themes noted above, but his brief is to write a narrative. The result is a sober, informed and user-friendly story whose trajectory goes from Alexander the Great to Bar Kokhba. And it is more than mere narrative. DeSilva engages (even if not overtly) with the complexities, ambiguities and controversies that plague our grasp of this era.

DeSilva opens the work most promisingly. He announces that the story of Judea can only be understood on the larger canvass of the Ptolemaic, Seleucid, Roman and Parthian empires (p. 1). Quite right. Unfortunately, the book provides very little on those empires as background or setting. Restrictions on space may have made that impossible. And those restrictions plainly discouraged pursuit of some central but problematic issues in detail. For instance, the degree and effect of Hellenism on Jewish culture have prompted scholarly discussion for many decades. DeSilva presents the Jewish relation to Hellenism as a matter of cultural exchange in which subordinate peoples endeavoured to learn the language of the conquerors, to imitate and to assimilate (pp. 7–8). But that diminishes the force of Jewish initiative and active adaptation. DeSilva recognises that 'Hellenization' did not entail a wholesale abandonment of Jewish principles and practices, but his image of a 'blending' does not strike quite the right note (p. 20). This was less a matter of *Verschmelzung* than of appropriation. The application of labels such as 'Hellenizing' leaders or a 'Hellenizing party' in the Hasmonean era (pp. 36, 38, 42, 44) misses the complex and intricate combination of internal political, nationalist and factional rivalries that marked those years. They cannot be reduced or subordinated to some cultural battle between 'Hellenists' and traditionalists. In the subsequent period Herod the Great showed a deep respect for Hellenic (and Roman) culture, while at the same time adhering to and promoting Jewish religious practice – without finding any tension between the two. The impact of Hellenism or Hellenisation requires a more subtle and extended analysis.

On the other hand, DeSilva correctly challenges the standard notion that Antiochus IV conducted a religious persecution of the Jews (p. 36). He valuably applies the same scepticism to the conflict between Rome and Judea that culminated in the Great Revolt, normally explained as Jewish resistance to Roman oppression. DeSilva instead notes that Gaius Caligula's effort to install a pagan deity in the Jerusalem Temple did not lead to a revolt against Roman rule (p. 133). And he rightly denies (as few commentators do) that the banditry and plundering by marauding bands constituted a form of Jewish revolutionary activity against Rome – although he believes that the boundaries between banditry and rebellion gradually blurred (pp. 137–8). DeSilva justifiably rejects the usual picture of Judea

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simmering with anti-Roman sentiment for years until boiling over in 66 CE, but seems to question his own conclusions shortly thereafter (pp. 139–40). The ambivalence of his position causes some misgivings. But DeSilva makes an important methodological point that deserves emphasis. Since we know the tragic outcome of these events, i.e. the unfortunate clash in the Great Revolt and its consequences, it is tempting to see all the relevant prior events as signalling a growing tension and increasing hostility between the Judean and Roman protagonists. As DeSilva argues, one needs to resist the temptation of teleology and explore the whole range of events that bring complexity and nuance to the topic, a jagged set of developments that defy any straight line to war (p. 122). That is sage advice – even if not always followed in this book.

The issue of how much resistance was possible or desirable by a small nation under the shadow of a major dominion is one of wide significance. Armed struggle is rarely possible, even more rarely successful. But resorting to other means to win hearts and minds could serve as alternatives. Jews had a long tradition of apocalyptic literature. DeSilva makes passing reference to messianic hopes as expressed in the Second Temple period, including the Dead Sea Scrolls as critique of the Hasmoneans (pp. 85–6). A more virulent reckoning accorded by the Sibylline Oracles is omitted. A fuller account of anti-Roman apocalyptic texts, produced after the fall of the Temple, appears in F. Peterella's article in the Marcone volume. He calls attention to works like the fifth book of the Sibyllines, IV Ezra, II Baruch or the *Paraleipomena* of Jeremiah that catalogue the sins of Jews responsible for their own disasters but also warn of divine retaliation upon Rome (as Babylon) in an eschatological future that would shatter the empire (pp. 131–47). How far this type of literature may have served as a form of protest and resistance – or indeed consolation – is hard to say. But there were certainly elements of messianism in the war of Bar Kokhba, and possibly in the diaspora uprisings in the time of Trajan, as noted by Capponi (p. 101). The role of apocalyptic thinking as a means of expression by Jews in the thrall of a superpower is a topic worth fuller exposition. But it has little play in these books.

One other item of relevance would have profited from consideration. Did the circumstances of Jewish experience as a piece in a larger political entity provoke any movement or thinking along the lines of what we might call nationalism? The question does not arise in any of these studies. It is hinted at perhaps in DeSilva's mention of Judas the Galilean's reaction to the Roman census and to the activities of the 'Zealots' (p. 125). Yet it hovers over many of the discussions without gaining articulation.

The works under consideration here treat the topic of Jewish experience under imperial powers largely from the Jewish perspective. What is missing (with a few exceptions) is examination of where Jews fit in the attitudes and policies of the imperial powers. DeSilva takes as a given Polybius' assessment of Rome's design to subject the whole world to Roman rule and sees it as implemented by weakening the Hellenistic kingdoms through advancement of their subject peoples, such as the Jews (pp. 19, 47, 50). That is a widespread presumption, but a questionable one. It deserves fuller scrutiny. Eck, in the Marcone compilation, observes that Rome generally respected the rights and privileges of Jews and denies any basic enmity or hatred (pp. 308–10, 317, 323). That is doubtless right. But no effort is made to interpret this laissez-faire approach in Roman terms nor to see it in the light of Roman behaviour and actions with regard to other peoples of the empire.

The perspective is thus one-sided. It limits advances in comprehending the balance between the authority of the superpowers and the range of options for the Judean underling. But these diverse publications as a group, each in their own way, address issues of significance and interest to scholars of Jewish history in antiquity: the emergence and

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implications of (perceived or real) gentile hostility to Jews, the relevance of ethnicity or culture in the perception of Jews by themselves and others, the complex historiography of the Jewish experience, and the record of the Jewish place in the Graeco-Roman world. Fortunately, they have left much more to say on these subjects.

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