Jewish Studies


Flavius Josephus’ *Jewish War*, which describes the history of the Jewish revolt against Rome (66–70 CE), has been labelled as one of the most influential texts in the history of western literature after the Bible. In this concise book, Oxford Professor of Jewish Studies Martin Goodman seeks to describe not only how this particular work was copied, printed, distributed, edited, translated, and adapted over the two thousand years of its existence; he devotes special attention to the changes in the reputation of the book and its author from antiquity to the present (ix).

The book is chronologically arranged and divided into four chapters. The first chapter (1–17) deals with Josephus’ career and provides an overview of the structure and aims of the *War* as well as its reception among its first readers in Rome and elsewhere. Goodman aligns his discussion with recent trends in scholarship, promulgating a distinct vision of the author Josephus and the structures and purposes of the *War*—for instance, by claiming that it “ran counter to the messages widely promulgated by Vespasian and Titus to the Roman people” and that “[m]any motifs in the book … would have made sense only to Jewish readers” (12). The second chapter (18–44) tells the story of *War’s* reception history after its first generation of readers. Goodman ascribes the survival of Josephus’ work *entirely* to the interests of the early Christians, for whom the *War* became a text with an authority that came close the Bible itself. Insightful are Goodman’s observations about the rediscovery of Josephus and the *War* by Jews around the 10th century. Particular weight is given to the *Sefer Yosippon*, a Hebrew book which was compiled from a variety of Latin works and became immensely popular and influential among Jews. In the third chapter (45–70), Goodman concentrates on the rediscovery of the Greek version of the *War* by Christians and Jews, who generally expressed their enthusiasm about Josephus as a historian and the veracity of his work. Already here, however, Goodman observes tentative changes in the generally favourable depiction of the *War* and its author, expressed most clearly in a letter written in 1783 by the of the British
This admirable book succeeds in treating concisely and comprehensively the life of a book with enduring historical and religious significance. In accomplishing this, Goodman strikes a balance between breadth and depth and has due attention for revealing examples—such as the beautifully illustrated Dutch translation of “Alle de werken van Flavius Josephus” by Willem Sewel, published in 1704. Some readers might raise questions about the proportionality of the chapters: the first three chapters (1–70) take up roughly the same amount of space as the fourth chapter (71–134). To be sure, in the preface Goodman explains this choice as reflecting “both the interest of these debates and their reverberations to the present day” (x). That these discussions are interesting and have contemporary relevance is undeniably true, but can the same not be said of Josephus’ life and career itself, treated in a mere seventeen pages? However, this is hardly a point of criticism. More systematic discussions of the latter subject already exist, whereas accessible comprehensive discussions of a very complex field of scholarship, written in a variety of languages, from the 18th to the 20th century are difficult to come by. This little book is, in other words, a must-read for anyone interested in Jewish history and literature, and the reception thereof in social and cultural contexts from antiquity to the present.

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