

A Victory For Posterity

Strauss, Barry . Wall Street Journal , Eastern edition; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y.]09 Dec 2019: A.17.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

Josephus's 'The Jewish War'

By Martin Goodman

(Princeton, 186 pages, \$24.95)

As any parent knows, when you send a child out into the world, there's no way to predict what twists and turns the youngster's life might take. How much truer that is for an author, especially when the "child" -- the book -- survives for two millennia.

When Josephus wrote his "Jewish War" around the year 75, he could not have guessed its longevity or its use and misuse. The book narrates a rebellion in Judea against Rome (66-73) that savaged a legion before the avenging empire sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and killed or enslaved large numbers of Jewish civilians. It includes vivid scenes of the Roman way of war, of suffering during the siege of Jerusalem, and, perhaps most memorably, of the mass suicide of resistance fighters making their last stand at Masada. A member of the Judean elite turned Roman citizen, Josephus wrote primarily for the Jews of the Mediterranean and the Near East. Yet the majority of his readers in the centuries since have been Christians.

Such is the winding and unpredictable path that Martin Goodman traces in "Josephus's 'The Jewish War': A Biography." A distinguished historian both of Judaism and of the Roman Empire, Mr. Goodman has produced, in his latest work, a succinct and vigorous account that combines erudition and an eye for detail with graceful insights.

The story of Josephus's book is full of paradox. "The Jewish War," as Mr. Goodman notes, is not a sacred text, but in the 19th century many Christians and Jews in America and England cherished it along with the Bible. Nor is the book great literature; Mr. Goodman rightly calls it instead "a fine work of almost instant history." Although a Roman Jew, Josephus wrote neither in Hebrew nor Latin. He produced two versions of his work, first (probably) in Aramaic, and then in Greek, the main language of Jews in the Roman Empire.

After the first generation of readers, Jews largely ignored the book for centuries. Christians, however, esteemed it as fulfillment of New Testament prophecies of the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple as a divine punishment for rejecting Christ. That would have shocked and appalled Josephus, Mr. Goodman says, who blamed the catastrophe instead on tyranny and factionalism within the Jewish community in Jerusalem. Yet one might say that Josephus was in no position to complain about alternate readings of his text, given his own ambiguous position.

He supplied both Jews and Romans with reasons to distrust him. Josephus first opposed the Jewish revolt against Rome, then accepted an important military command. When defeat loomed, he agreed to a suicide pact, then changed his mind and survived. He talked his way into the entourage of the Roman commanders who eventually sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. Fetching up in Rome as a Roman citizen and protege of the emperors, Josephus earned the distrust of some fellow citizens for his outspoken and courageous defense of Jews. If all that weren't equivocal enough, he changed important details of his account of his career in a Life written after "The Jewish War."

So perhaps it is only fitting that "The Jewish War" has evoked such widely varying responses. As Mr. Goodman explains, the book made its way back into Jewish consciousness only in the Middle Ages and only through the

circuitous route of a Hebrew book based on a Latin paraphrase of various works of ancient literature, including parts of "The Jewish War." This odd product contained a number of errors, some purposeful "improvements" on the original, some careless mistakes, such as misidentifying the author as another Josephus -- that is, as Joseph ben Gorion, a rebel leader in Jerusalem, instead of Joseph ben Matthias, the real author. Yet this idiosyncratic work turned out to be the most important Hebrew historical book of the Middle Ages. It was also read by Muslims and by Ethiopian Christians, who still consider it Scripture. Nor did its influence end there: It was still widely read in the 20th century. For example, it inspired Israel's future first prime minister to change his name from David Grun to David Ben-Gurion, after the rebel leader and purported author.

The liveliest part of Mr. Goodman's book is his account of the career of "The Jewish War" in modern times. Among Anglophone Christians, the book earned the respect of such writers as Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling and Mark Twain, all using a widely read English translation. Gen. Lew Wallace said that "The Jewish War" inspired his best-selling novel "Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ" (1880) -- and hence the later Broadway play and Hollywood films. Among Jews, "The Jewish War" has served as a touchstone in debates about practically every aspect of the modern experience. Josephus has been praised as a hero and role model or accused as a traitor and collaborator. He appears as one of the great names of Jewish history in a play performed in the Warsaw Ghetto and written by one of the participants in the uprising. The Holocaust generated sympathy for Josephus as a witness to national tragedy.

With the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948, "The Jewish War" found acceptance "as a narrative for a proud new nation," Mr. Goodman writes. He notes in particular how the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 and the excavation of Masada in the 1960s brought Josephus into the center of Israeli national consciousness. Because the scrolls documented a pietistic religious community similar to one described to Josephus, they appeared to deepen Israel's roots in history. Meanwhile, the fall of Masada is one of the most intense scenes in "The Jewish War." As for Josephus's own checkered career, Israel's harsh experience over the years, Mr. Goodman suggests, has generated some understanding for him as a political realist. But only some: Ambivalence persists. These vicissitudes and more are recounted with scholarly depth by Mr. Goodman in this short but quite marvelous book.

Mr. Strauss is a professor of history and classics at Cornell University. He is the author of "Ten Caesars: Roman Emperors From Augustus to Constantine."

Credit: By Barry Strauss

DETAILS

Subject:	Writers; Middle Ages; Careers; Roman civilization; Books; Consciousness; Christians; Jews
Location:	Masada Middle East Dead Sea Israel Jerusalem Israel England
People:	Kipling, Rudyard (1865-1936) Hardy, Thomas (1840-1928) Twain, Mark (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) (1835-1910)
Company / organization:	Name: Cornell University; NAICS: 611310
Publication title:	Wall Street Journal, Eastern edition; New York, N.Y.
First page:	A.17
Publication year:	2019

Publication date:	Dec 9, 2019
column:	Bookshelf
Publisher:	Dow Jones &Company Inc
Place of publication:	New York, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States, New York, N.Y.
Publication subject:	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
ISSN:	00999660
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2322608752
Document URL:	https://search.proquest.com/docview/2322608752?accountid=13042
Copyright:	Copyright 2019 Dow Jones &Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Last updated:	2019-12-09
Database:	ABI/INFORM Global

LINKS

[Find it @ Oxford](#)

Database copyright © 2019 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)