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REVIEW–DISCUSSION

A VERY STABLE GENIUS: FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS AND THE PERILS OF SELF-PRAISE

Eelco Glas, *Flavius Josephus' Self-Characterisation in First-Century Rome: A Historiographical Analysis of Autobiographical Discourse in the* Judaean War. Historiography of Rome and its Empire 19. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2024. pp. xi + 271. Hardback, €108.00/$120.00. ISBN 978-90-04-69763-8.

Over the years, Flavius Josephus has had to endure more than his fair share of hostile moralising scholarship. Among the many grave defects which such scholarship has attributed to this author, the charge of vanity is prominent, alongside accusations of cowardice, sycophancy, and opportunism.[1] The perception of vanity derives, above all, from the fact that Josephus is one of the most autobiographically inclined of all the ancient historical writers. Not only did he write what many readers have characterised as an actual autobiography, the *Life of Josephus* (originally an appendix to his *Jewish Antiquities*), but he also made himself a major character in his earlier *Jewish War*, the dominant figure of Book 3 of that work and a significant recurring presence before and after that book too. Much of this autobiographical content seems to be devoted to the ancient and ignoble art of self-glorification. However, if Josephus was a boaster, it seems that his boasts have not impressed many modern readers. That moralising scholarship which delights in damning Josephus draws entirely on Josephus' own works to construct its hostile characterisations. It is tempting to conclude on the basis of this that, if self-apologia is indeed a prominent tendency in Josephus' works, he was quite spectacularly bad at it.

This would, of course, be to judge Josephus' self-characterisation solely in the light of its modern scholarly reception. This new volume by Eelco Glas (henceforth EG), an adapted version of the author's Groningen PhD thesis issued as part of Brill's 'Historiography of Rome and Its Empire' series, proposes something different. This will be, its author assures us, 'the first systematic historiographical analysis of autobiographical discourse in the *War*'

[1] Fortunately, this moralistic scholarship is (mostly) a nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomenon. For a survey of the 'classical conception of Josephus' as a vain, opportunistic traitor, see Bilde (1988) 126–41.

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(4). While earlier scholarship that focuses on Josephus' self-characterisation does exist, most of it concentrates on the *Life*, so EG's focus on self-characterisation in the *War* is novel and refreshing.[2] EG aims to read Josephus' self-fashioning in the *War* in the light of contemporary expectations concerning autobiographical discourse in Greek and Roman literature more broadly. In attempting this, EG urges us to go beyond the most obvious 'classical' literary antecedents of the *Jewish War*, Thucydides and Polybius. While both of these authors indeed feature as characters in their own historical works, their autobiographical content is far less prominent than that of Josephus, and is of limited value in helping us to understand this aspect of Josephus' project. Instead, EG focuses on a much broader range of Greek and Roman texts, both as potential models for Josephus and more generally as illustrative of Greek and Roman thinking about acceptable practices of literary self-presentation. This sympathetic attempt to contextualise Josephus' self-characterisation within ancient generic expectations, rather than merely to dismiss him as a conceited Trumpian blowhard, promises to enrich our understanding of a vital but under-studied element of the *Jewish War*.[3]

A brief Introduction (1–11) gets the ball rolling. EG supplies a brisk and bracing tour of earlier scholarship on Josephan autobiography, and sketches the ambitions and structure of the volume to follow. Probably the most significant point of divergence from prior scholarship that EG identifies here is the historicist orientation of previous work: most earlier scholars, when considering Josephus' autobiographical content, have attempted to see *through* the text, using it as a window onto the *realia* of the life of the historical Josephus, rather than looking *at* the text itself, as EG proposes to do. This is a common story in Josephus scholarship, reflective of the 'literary turn' that has marked engagement with this author since roughly the turn of the millennium.

Chapter 1, 'Character and Exemplarity' (12–55), aims to cover several bases (indeed, at times it rather reads like two distinct chapters merged into one). It first establishes some fundamental aspects of the *Jewish War* (date, audience, aims, and structure), and then it considers characterisation in Greek and Roman literature more broadly and how the *Jewish War* handles presentation of character in general in the light of the foregoing. The section on 'Basic Observations' (15–24) includes a necessary rebuttal of some recent attempts partially to rehabilitate source-critical approaches to Josephus, insisting instead, quite rightly, on Josephus' status as an author in his own right

[2] For considerations of Josephus' self-presentation in the *Life*, see, for instance, Cohen (1979); Grojnowski (2023).

[3] EG makes some comments on Trump parallels on 1–4. This review, written just days after the 47th president declared, at his inauguration, that he had been saved by God in order to rescue America from chaos, cannot help but be alert to the contemporary relevance of scholarship on the limits of acceptable autopanegyric.

rather than a transparent compiler of earlier sources.[4] This is very cheering. This same section also attempts to establish Josephus' social position as an author in Rome, offering a markedly more optimistic picture of his connections and station than some earlier reconstructions, largely, it seems, in service of EG's insistence that the *Jewish War* should be read primarily as a text aimed at an elite non-Jewish audience (I will return to this insistence later).[5] A critic may reasonably quibble that here EG is engaging in precisely the kind of scholarship which he appears to reject in the Introduction, looking *through* rather than *at* the text. One may also quibble with the unconvincing attempt to use Josephus' later reception to demonstrate that he won an elite readership at Rome. EG cites Tacitus' use of Josephus as a source for the *Histories*, which is a questionable claim, although the reader would not know that from EG's presentation of the issue. He also cites Dio's and Suetonius' mentions of Josephus (Suet. *Vesp.* 5.6; Dio Cass. 66.1.4.), although they refer to him only as a participant in the war and demonstrate no knowledge that he wrote anything and no clear indications that they used him as a source. Josephus' broad reception among Christian authors is also raised, which is not particularly relevant, because Christians had their own reasons for being interested in Josephus, reasons unconnected with the author's social position or reception among the elite. There is, in fact, very little indication that Josephus' works were widely known to elite Greeks and Romans. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that he was not writing in the hopes of such an audience, but nevertheless the picture seems somewhat different to that which EG paints. EG's brief survey of rhetoric, exemplarity and characterisation in historiography more broadly helpfully illuminates the chapter's closing discussion of exemplarity in the works of Josephus. Here, EG very perceptively contrasts the handling of exemplarity in the *War* with the later *Antiquities*: while the latter text repeatedly insists and demonstrates that exemplary moral behaviour will be rewarded by God, the earlier work, in strong contrast, tends to depict its most obviously exemplary characters failing and suffering. This is a mark, as EG rightly observes, of the tragic colouring and 'Thucydidean gloom' (37) which infects the *Jewish War* throughout, and which necessarily complicates the moral picture.

Chapter 2, 'The Perspective of Josephus' Self-Characterisation' (56–83) surveys pertinent conventions about autobiographical writing in Greece and Rome, before going on to explore the connections between Josephus' self-presentation and the broader themes of the *Jewish War*. One salutary tendency of the book which comes into sharp focus in this chapter is EG's willingness seriously to consider the possibility of Josephus' engagement with Latin as well

[4] For the new *Quellenforschung,* see Schwartz (2016); Czajkowski and Eckhardt (2021).

[5] For a non-optimistic reconstruction, see Cotton and Eck (2005).

as Greek literary models. No strong consensus exists in scholarship about whether or not Josephus is likely to have acquired advanced competence in Latin, and Josephus scholars have generally tended to be resistant to the possibility of his familiarity with Latin historiography. This is, in some ways, surprising: Josephus himself cites Livy at *AJ* 14.68, and it has long been suspected that his account of Caligula's assassination in *Antiquities* Book 19 depends on lost Latin histories.[6] Again, one can quibble with specific elements of EG's argument. He observes that the factors which underpin the common claim that Josephus modelled the *Jewish Antiquities* on Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *Roman Antiquities* (namely that they had similar names and the same number of books) would also apply to the *Jewish War* and Caesar's *commentarii*: one may legitimately wonder whether this really amounts to a serious case for Josephus' engagement with Caesar, or is rather an exposé of the weakness of the arguments for his engagement with Dionysius. Additionally, EG uses J.S. Ward's claims about the apparent influence of Latin grammar on Josephus' Greek to strengthen the case that Josephus knew Latin well at the time of composition of the *Jewish War*, but this is questionable, given that Ward's precise argument is that there is seemingly little Latin influence on the grammar and syntax of the *War* and rather more in the later works.[7] It seems unlikely that the question of Josephus' Latin competence can be answered to everybody's satisfaction on the available evidence, but nevertheless EG should be applauded for his openness to the possibility: the question of the *Jewish War*'s engagement with Latin models is something of a new frontier in scholarship, and presents exciting possibilities.

Later in the chapter, EG notes the difficulties of self-praise under the Principate, when all glory was supposed to accrue to the emperor and his family. EG suggests that Josephus could get away with it (unlike certain other high-profile authors who foundered on this dangerous terrain, such as Cornelius Gallus) because of his first-person self-characterisation as a scholar-historian rather than as an active man of politics. EG notes that Josephus' decision to describe his actions as a character in the third rather than the first person is more characteristic of Greek than Roman autobiographical historiography (Caesar was an outlier), and argues very successfully that much of Josephus' self-presentation as a character seems configured to establish his objectivity and authority as a historian. He also notes (a point further developed in Chapter 4) the scarcity of overt authorial praise of the character Josephus, and sees this as a concession to anxieties about the appropriateness of explicit self-praise. This interesting observation could productively have been connected to other features of the text: despite his reputation as a 'Flavian

[6] On Caligula, see Goud (1996).

[7] Ward (2007).

propagandist', Josephus very rarely praises Vespasian or Titus explicitly in the authorial voice. The problem of the praise of rulers by historians caused Greek and Roman authors at least as much anxiety as the problem of excessive self-praise: the mirroring of strategies for praising himself and the Flavian Dynasty perhaps serves as a further indication of Josephus' engagement with and awareness of Greek and Roman problematisations of panegyrical content in historiography.

Chapter 3, 'Josephus' Virtues and the Moralising Nature of the *War*' (84–141), is the longest in the book. It provides careful readings of the main autobiographical passages in *Jewish War* 2 and 3 concerning Josephus' command over rebellious Galilee and his conduct of the rebel defence at the siege of Jotapata in 67. On EG's persuasive and well informed reading, Book 2 depicts Josephus behaving like a typical statesman of the Roman period, which above all meant acting to contain *στάσις* in the territory under his command. The differences between the depiction of the Galilean command in the *War* and in Josephus' later *Life* have frequently been read with a view to determining which is more historically 'accurate', and the many discrepancies between the two accounts have been meticulously itemised in prior scholarship.[8] EG's reading, staying true to the promise of the Introduction, wisely avoids the morass of attempting to judge which account is 'truer' and notes instead the fundamentally different orientations of the two narratives. The *Life* depicts Josephus' Galilean command as a period of constant struggle against local leaders who disputed his authority, and aims to present Josephus as a crafty and sophisticated politician protected by God against the snares of his rivals. The *War*, by contrast, depicts Josephus quickly establishing uncontested authority over the region, effectively snuffing out *στάσις* and imposing discipline ahead of the Roman incursion. The examination of Josephus' self-presentation as a general at Jotapata establishes that the portrait is largely conventional in terms of Greek and Roman ideas about military virtues, with a stress on Josephus' *virtus bellandi*, *scientia militaris* and *fortuna*. While broadly persuasive, this analysis arguably suffers from a tendency to reduce Greek and Roman thinking about military virtues, which was actually fluid and diverse, into a single unitary tradition. For this reader, the best section of the chapter considers how Josephus' portrayal of his reversed fortunes at Jotapata gives the autobiographical material a tragic flavour, which resonates strongly with the tragic underpinnings of the *Jewish War* as a whole.

Chapter 4, 'Josephus and the Decorum of Self-Praise', presents a valuable and original reading of how Josephus' self-portrayal in the *War* engages with discussions in an admirably broad range of Greek and Roman authors on the appropriateness of self-praise, and on rhetorical strategies which could serve

[8] See e.g. Rappaport (1994).

to mitigate and justify it. By the end of the chapter, the reader will be in no doubt that Josephus, far from being a naïve and gauche self-promoter, was well-informed about this discourse and acutely sensitive to the difficulties which autopanegyric involved. EG finds a range of attested contemporary strategies for mitigating the offense of self-praise: presenting such content as a response to unjustified criticism imposed by compulsion on an unwilling author; stressing the role of Fortune in the subject's successes and achievements; using self-praise for the purposes of edifying exemplarity; and tempering self-praise by including material which acknowledged the author's (minor) errors or shortcomings. EG goes on to show how all of these features are characteristic of Josephus' self-praise, not only in the *Jewish War* but also in later 'autobiographical' passages in the *Life of Josephus* and *Against Apion*, illustrating a career-long commitment on Josephus' part to the process of making his self-praise palatable. EG also highlights important strategies of indirect self-praise which are in evidence both in Josephus and in broader discourse, such as allowing characters within the narrative to praise the author's constructed self, or insinuating praise of the author by explicitly praising other characters who are depicted as similar to the author (EG illustrates the latter point with reference to Josephus' praises of Ananus ben Ananus and, less persuasively to this reader, Herod).

Chapter 5, 'Character Contested' (184–228), focuses on one of the strategies of appropriate self-praise identified in the previous chapter, self-praise presented as a necessary apologetic rebuttal of unmerited attacks on the author. It has often been noted that many of Josephus' most apparently immodest claims are presented as responses to external critiques (especially in the *Life*, where Josephus makes much of certain criticisms of him made in the works of a rival historian of the Jewish Revolt, Justus of Tiberias).[9] It is perhaps here where we most strongly feel the difference between EG's literary focus and the historicising bent of much prior scholarship. Previously, Josephus' claims to be responding to unmerited attacks have served as a basis for reconstructing his life in Rome as one beset by hostility and criticism from all quarters. Here, EG reverses this: now, instead of seeing Josephus' self-praise as necessitated by vicious critiques in his historical setting, the recognition of apologia as a rhetorical trope raises the possibility that Josephus may in fact be exploiting (in some cases perhaps even fabricating) the critiques in order to enable his self-praise. EG's main focus for most of this chapter is on Josephus' depiction of his controversial surrender to Vespasian after the Romans breached the walls of Jotapata, an episode which has often been read as necessitating apologetic self-presentation. EG takes strong exception to the claim that this narrative in *War* 3 is primarily directed at Jewish readers who

[9] See e.g. Rajak (1973).

may have seen Josephus as a traitor. EG demonstrates strongly that the Jotapata surrender narrative clearly resonates with significant parallels in Greek and Roman autobiographical literature, especially concerning the role of dreams and divine signs, and alongside this he argues against the notion that Josephus' account of his 'nightly visions' which predicted the rise of Vespasian and the failure of the Jewish Revolt constitutes an attempt to position himself as a Jewish prophet. EG's probing of Greek and Roman parallels (particularly the dream of Xenophon in the *Anabasis*) demonstrates clearly that here, as throughout his corpus, Josephus goes to significant lengths to ensure that his works are comprehensible and approachable to non-Jewish readers steeped in 'the classics'. However, EG's impressive demonstration of this causes him, at times, to go too far, specifically when discussing the audience of the *Jewish War*.

Throughout, EG has insisted on the primacy of a non-Jewish intended readership. While initially he does acknowledge that Jews may have been among the Greek-literate, Rome-resident audience targeted by Josephus (21), he later seems to lose sight of this, at times attempting to deny the validity of any reading which suggests that Josephus attempts to speak specifically to envisioned Jewish readers. For instance, on p. 207, EG writes 'Given the local and social conditions of ancient book dissemination … it is unlikely that Josephus said things that made sense only to Judaeans'. This is not necessarily the case: not if one acknowledges that Greek-literate Jews existed in Rome at this time, and indeed much scholarship appears to have established fairly clearly that Josephus demonstrably *does* occasionally say things which would have made sense only to Jews.[10] EG himself notes (129–32) that Josephus' recounting of biblical history in a speech which he puts into his own mouth at the walls of Jerusalem makes clever use of his selected *exempla*, at times manipulating the stories as recounted in the biblical books in order to make them fit the present rhetorical moment: this seems to be an excellent example of Josephus including content which would only fully make sense to a Jewish reader who knew the original stories, which seems rather out of step with the author's later denial that Josephus would incorporate material oriented towards a Jewish audience. A little later, EG claims that 'a comparison with Xenophon's works and a cursory survey of dream episodes in the Roman memoir tradition also render untenable the hypothesis that Josephus specifically designed the passage to address a Judaean argument'. Again, this is not necessarily so: not if we accept that Josephus is capable of doing more than one thing at once, and of bearing in mind the expectations of diverse readers simultaneously. The fact (demonstrated unquestionably throughout EG's excellent study) that Josephus is conscious of and deeply attentive to Greek and

[10] E.g. Ferda (2013); Davies (2019).

Roman literary forms and expectations in no way means that he cannot, at the same time, be conscious of other conceivable elements in his audience.

This could be interpreted as being unnecessarily binary. In sentences like those quoted above, we seem to encounter a belief that the *Jewish War* can *either* be Jewish *or* Graeco-Roman in orientation. This starkly reduces the messy complexity of identity typical in imperial contexts (including the Roman), diminishes rather than enriches the possibility for interesting readings of the texts, and is entirely unnecessary. EG's study is an excellent demonstration of Josephus' profound engagement with Greek and Roman literary traditions, and makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of this text from that perspective. But it does not need to conclude that Greek and Roman elements are all that there are in the *War*. This tendency at times leads to real mischaracterisation of the work, as on p. 217, where we are told that 'the Judaean schema of sin and divine punishment' *may* have been 'at the back of Josephus' mind when he wrote the *War*'. This position is asserted in opposition to numerous scholars who have argued that this schema is basic to the entire conception of history which underpins the work.[11] In reality, the *Jewish War* does not need to be either Graeco-Roman or Jewish; it can be (and is) messily, gloriously and ingeniously both.

Overall, EG has produced a valuable, perceptive and persuasive reading of the autobiographical element of the *Jewish War* which is extensively and carefully contextualised in the light of the broader literary culture of its age. It is particularly commendable for its wide and careful reading in Greek and Roman literature, its perceptive delineation of the thematic continuities between Josephus' self-presentation and the broader literary features of the work, and its laudable openness to the possibility that Latin literary precedents, as well as Greek, may have shaped the work. The book is polished: while a small number of typos are in evidence, none seriously impacts the comprehension of the argument and so they do not merit mentioning in this review, with the exception of an unfortunate misprint on p. 58, which gives '4 CE' rather than '4 BCE' as the date of the death of Herod and so may potentially mislead the reader. Despite my disagreements with the book's treatment of the topic of the *War*'s intended audience, I can heartily recommend this work, which deserves a wide readership among scholars interested in Josephus, classical historiography more broadly, and life-writing in ancient Rome.

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[11] In addition to Ferda and Davies cited in the previous footnote, see, for example, Moehring (1984); Lindner (1972); Spilsbury (2002).

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