DOI: https://doi.org/10.29173/histos722 *Histos* 20 (2026) I–XI

REVIEW-DISCUSSION

JOSEPHUS AMONG THE AUTOBIOGRAPHERS

Davina Grojnowski, *Situating Josephus'* Life *within Ancient Autobiography: Genre in Context*. Education, Literary Culture and Religious Practice in the Ancient World. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Pp. vii + 205. Hardback, £85.00; ISBN 978-1-350-32016-1. Paperback, £28.99; ISBN 978-1-350-32019-2.

Josephus continues to come into his own as a key witness to and actor in the first-century world, increasingly finding his place no longer at the margins. The book under review is another welcome contribution to not only our deepening understanding of Josephus' narratives but also our growing awareness of how they fit and functioned within his Judean, Greek, and Roman context(s). Grojnowski addresses a question that has certainly been asked before, namely, what the literary nature of Josephus' *Life* is, but she answers it on a firmer basis by attending to the methodological considerations that necessarily lie behind such a question and by carefully placing *Life* within the stream of ancient Greek and Latin texts. In doing so, she provides the groundwork for the pursuit of even deeper understanding, as she makes clear in the final chapter of the book, where she charts a course forward and begins the process of examining *Life* with this clearer perception.

One of the key challenges with previous approaches to the question of the genre of *Life*, Grojnowski makes clear in her opening chapter, has been the absence of clear definitions for the genres proposed. The frequent imposition of modern expectations on the ancient text or even character judgments of Josephus himself have also impacted the clarity and quality of conclusions offered.[1] Moreover, the significance of misidentifying genre should not be underestimated. The stakes are high. Grojnowski provides an amusing example in the Chinese *People's Daily*'s reception as factual of an article from the well-known satirical online 'newspaper' *The Onion*, which named North Korean leader Kim Yong-Un as Sexiest Man Alive in 2012.[2] Satire is perhaps uniquely open to misinterpretation, especially outside of the culture that produces it, but the example effectively illustrates the dangers in identifying

[1] See her survey of previous scholarly treatments of *Life*'s genre on pages 6–15.

[2] https://theonion.com/kim-jong-un-named-the-onions-sexiest-man-alive-for-2012-1819574194/

ISSN: 2046-5963 9 February 2026

genre incorrectly.[3] As 'an expectation-generating literary framework' (24), genre is essential to successful communication between author and audience. Grojnowski's aim, then, is to provide a more secure basis for the technical categorisation of *Life* as autobiography, that is, as participating in the genre of autobiography. She accomplishes this successfully, on the one hand, by applying with sophistication the necessary theoretical considerations of modern genre theory, and on the other hand, by analysing *Life* within its ancient context, comparing it to other literary texts in order to assess on the basis of shared (or omitted) literary features how it should be classified. In making her case, she also addresses the question whether autobiography as a genre even existed in antiquity, something not all scholars have agreed on to this point.[4]

After she sets the parameters of the study in the opening chapter, Grojnowski helpfully includes a chapter introducing the reader to genre theory and the methodology that will be applied to *Life* and other ancient texts often associated with the genre of autobiography. This chapter is necessary for advancing the scholarly conversation, since it has often been a lack of technical precision that has resulted in a lack of clarity in the debate. Given the understandable brevity of this chapter, however, readers unfamiliar with genre theory may appreciate the fuller recent introduction to the field by Andrew Judd, geared towards scholars in Biblical studies, but of benefit to those working with Greek and Latin literature.[5] Familiarity with genre theory is necessary for greater appreciation of the impact that genre choice has on the creation of meaning as the author communicates with his audience. It also helps us understand how there can be disagreement over genres among modern scholars, since texts frequently '[hover] uncomfortably on the boundaries intersecting several genres' (28). This should not undermine confidence in the value of genre theory, but demonstrates instead one of its key axioms, namely the fuzziness of genre boundaries. Texts such as *Life* can include features that belong to other genres (e.g., historiography, biography) without necessitating recategorisation. The system is, as Grojnowski observes, 'organic' rather than 'rigid' (31). It is also important to distinguish between autobiography as genre and as 'mode', the latter being observed in various passages of Josephus' *Judean War* that are 'autobiographical',[6] even though that

[3] See also Judd (2024) xv–xvi, for a similar illustration from *The Babylon Bee*, a Christian satirical website.

[4] E.g., Whitmarsh (2005) and other scholars discussed by Grojnowski (16–24).

[5] Judd (2024); see also, more generally Frow (2014).

[6] On the autobiographical passages in the *War*, see Glas (2024).

work should clearly not be classified in terms of genre as autobiography, but as historiography.[7]

The second half of this foundational chapter addresses the potential charge that genre theory imposes itself on the ancient text and that genre considerations are absent from the literary consciousness of ancient writers like Josephus. Here Grojnowski demonstrates clearly that authors like Plutarch, Cicero, and Isocrates were aware of what they were writing and, significantly, were *not* writing. To them, as to us, the features of ancient genres were clear, distinct, and recognisable. They were even aware of the 'fuzziness' of genres, since ancient authors concerned about literary decorum complained about the mixing of genres, itself evidence of its common practice. The chapter ends with a discussion of the particular challenges in the ancient world associated with writing about oneself, especially for self-praise or promotion. In her survey of a large number of texts Grojnowski importantly does not flatten the situation, but explores them diachronically, emphasising that different circumstances created different pressures or opportunities that necessitated carefully navigating genre expectations, features, and boundaries. This sets the reader up well for considering Josephus' publication of *Life* at a time when he faced the unique challenges of Rome under Domitian's rule.[8]

The third chapter establishes 'Josephus' literary milieu', a necessary step that rests on the important principle of genre theory that no text exists *sui generis*.[9] That is, Josephus was not writing in a vacuum but made decisions in his writing that were based on his knowledge of and experience with prior literary works. His audience, moreover, read his works in light of *their* knowledge of and experience with the same. In this chapter, Grojnowski offers as comparatives texts from a range of authors over a period from the late Republic to the third century AD, analysing them under their ancient names or titles, namely *res gestae*, *vita*/βίος, *commentarius*, and ὑπομνήματα, each of which has been associated with the genre of autobiography. The final section of this chapter tackles the challenge posed by texts like Xenophon's *Anabasis*, whose genre is especially difficult to pin down, considering that he writes extensively about himself in a text that bears close resemblance to works of historiography. Grojnowski argues that the *Anabasis*, 'represents an author who wishes to write about himself, and uses the literary means available to him, at a time praised for its literary innovations' (74). She thus carefully accounts for the uniqueness of this work without claiming it to be *sui generis*. This provides good ground and a helpful context for considering Josephus' own efforts to

[7] See Mason (2015) 11–35.

[8] On Josephus' relationship with Domitian, see Den Hollander (2014) 200–51.

[9] This foundational principle of genre theory is established clearly by Burridge (2004) in relation to the gospels; on Burridge, who has had a clear influence on the book under review, see Grojnowski (35–6).

present himself literarily, drawing on what he knew, while also creatively adapting his narrative to suit his own context and purposes.

After these opening chapters that establish the methodological foundation and scholarly context for her study, Grojnowski turns her attention over the next three chapters to a careful analysis of various features of *Life* that are then compared with those texts that have been associated with the genre of autobiography. Her purpose in these chapters is to consider 'whether a coherent pattern emerges into which individual texts can be integrated and whether any text consistently falls out of line or moves along the boundaries of an established pattern' (80); that is, she seeks to establish the existence of autobiography as a genre in Josephus' literary world and to identify its features. In the first of these chapters, Grojnowski deals with the thorny problem posed by the close association between Josephus' *Judean Antiquities* and *Life*, which she judges (in line with previous scholars) to be so close that the epilogue of the former functioned as the prologue of the latter.[10] In this epilogue/prologue, Josephus signals his purposes to the reader, including catchphrases that Grojnowski demonstrates were present in other autobiographical works such as those of Nicolaus of Damascus, Augustus, and Sulla. These catchphrases had the purpose of shaping the expectations of the audience and preparing them to appreciate what followed. The other areas she addresses are the percentage of sentences within which Josephus is the subject and the relative allocation of space to different parts of the narrative, including the parallel and proportional accounts of Josephus' early and late career (*Life* 1–16, 414–29). Both of these aspects of *Life* are subsequently compared to other ancient writings (especially Xenophon's *Anabasis* and Caesar's *Gallic War*), with both similarities and differences noted. The conclusions in this and the following chapters are carefully formulated and marked out helpfully for the reader in italics. This chapter, as with the others in the book, ends with a summary and conclusion that assists the reader in following the argument and anticipating what lies ahead.

Chapter 5 is devoted to examining the 'External Features' of the text. This begins with the so-called 'mode of representation', by which Grojnowski means '*Life*'s (and the comparative literature's) oral or written presentation or dissemination' (95). That is, genre accounts not only for the written version of the text that we have received, but also for the text as presented orally in the context of social events such as the *recitatio*.[11] Other features considered include the literary structure (largely chronological with a concentric pattern),[12] the existence of discrete literary units or pericopes, the scale of the work

[10] See esp. Mason (2001) xiv.

[11] About which, see Mason (2005a) 71–100; Den Hollander (2014) 288–93.

[12] As argued by Mason (2001) xxi–xxvii.

(geographically and temporally), the methods of characterisation, and the use of sources. Each of these aspects is compared with other literary works, both prior and subsequent, including again Xenophon's *Anabasis*, Caesar's *Gallic War*, as well as Nicolaus of Damascus' now fragmentary *βίος*, and Libanius' *Oration* 1. Despite the variation she observes under each of these categories, Grojnowski nevertheless concludes that 'A consistent family resemblance is evident',[13] especially displayed in 'the insistent focus on the author (scale) and the ostensible reliance on memory and personal source material' (115). This accords with what genre theory has established regarding genre's solidity at the core and fuzziness at the edges.[14]

Grojnowski then moves on to consider the 'Internal Features' of *Life* in comparison to other ancient texts. The wide-ranging features she analyses are 'setting, topoi, style, atmosphere, quality of characterization, social setting, time of composition, and purpose' (117). Each of these is considered briefly in relation to *Life*, followed by comparative material. This approach, as with the other chapters, allows the reader to see the case build cumulatively over the course of the chapter. One significant conclusion, in connection with the various literary *topoi*, is that all the texts analysed share an emphasis on deeds and accomplishments that are chosen to reflect positively on the respective virtues of the author (123–4). This anticipates Grojnowski's discussion of the purpose of *Life* against the backdrop of other autobiographical narratives (148–55). Without making the mistake of restricting Josephus (and other ancient writers) to a single aim or purpose, Grojnowski observes that 'an apologetic purpose has been attributed to almost every text here discussed, including *Life*' (155). This is an important conclusion. It does not, however, necessarily support the long-standing argument that the accusations of Justus of Tiberias provided the main impetus for the writing of *Life*,[15] which, to be clear, Grojnowski herself does not suggest. There is enough evidence indicating that Josephus had reason to defend and promote his reputation while living in the city of Rome even apart from an attack by Justus.[16]

The penultimate chapter gathers up the 'Conclusions of the Analysis'. Significantly, Grojnowski argues that 'The conclusions allow us to understand and visualize the existence of a recognized genre, enabling us to move away

[13] Judd (2024) 30, cautions against using the metaphor of 'family resemblance', which originates with Ludwig Wittgenstein but has been challenged by modern genre theorists, particularly those associated with cognitive linguistics, because it is not precise enough; see Frow (2014) 57–9.

[14] Judd (2024) 29–32.

[15] E.g., Rajak (1973) 344–68; Cohen (2002) 114–37; but cf. Mason (1998) 36–44; Mason (2001) xxvii–l.

[16] See Joseph. *Vit.* 423–9; see also 336–7, 416–17; *BJ* 7.437–53; Den Hollander (2014) 299–300.

from modal perceptions of autobiographic or autobiographical and instead to conceptualize ancient autobiography' (159). This conclusion is justified by her careful analysis of the literary details of *Life*, alongside its comparatives, and her application of modern genre theory to this analysis. Her defence, moreover, of the application of the name 'autobiography' to this ancient genre is also convincing, provided we understand that while genres shift and develop over time, the features, boundaries, and expectations of a genre can be recognised even over the *longue durée* and thus ancient and modern texts can be linked profitably.

Recognising the genre of Josephus' *Life* helps us understand more deeply not only the literary work, but also the author himself. Grojnowski observes in Josephus' writing both continuities and discontinuities with his literary forebearers that reveal his sophistication as a writer. He was no 'unimaginative pen-pusher',[17] then! Thus, on the one hand, Grojnowski writes that 'Josephus was highly aware of his literary construct while writing and intent on writing in a conservative fashion' (164). That is, he stood on the shoulders of those who wrote before him. But, on the other hand, Grojnowski also suggests that his *Life* may be 'the first fully extant example of its kind' (165), while expressing appropriate caution because so much ancient literary material has been lost. This thought is further developed in connection with Alastair Fowler's literary theory, which suggests that the life of a genre can be traced through various stages.[18] Grojnowski posits that the proto-stage of the genre may be identified with Xenophon and his contemporaries, the primary stage with Sulla, Augustus, and Catulus, and a secondary stage with Josephus himself. According to Grojnowski, Josephus 'creates the secondary stage, as he consciously reacts to and modifies the primary stage' (166). While this delineation of stages is helpful for understanding continuities and discontinuities in the development of the genre, it is unclear to me what it means that Josephus reacts to and modifies the primary stage *consciously*. If this simply means that Josephus writes within an existing genre, aware of what texts he desires to emulate or imitate, but adapts the features to suit his own purposes, then I can agree. That is, after all, how genre works, as genre theory has made clear. But I am not sure that it is realistic to imagine that Josephus is aware of the way in which he is developing the genre. Later, Grojnowski describes him as reacting to 'an *innate* understanding of the genre autobiography in antiquity' (182; emphasis added). This seems to me to be a more likely way to frame the way in which he writes his *Life* in relation to what lies before.

[17] Bilde (1988) 126, describing the way Josephus had been portrayed by previous scholars. Laqueur (1920) viii, colourfully accused scholars of seeing Josephus as a 'stumpfer Abschreiber'.

[18] Fowler (1985).

The book ends with the final chapter 'A New Reading', which lays out briefly the implications of the study for our interpretation of *Life* and suggests new avenues for research. Grojnowski observes that by writing autobiography, Josephus asks his audience to identify with him, side with him, and sympathise with him. This includes embracing his subtle critique of the Flavians, established especially through irony,[19] with the ultimate purpose of elevating the audience's view of Josephus himself. Thus, Grojnowski writes, 'The weakness of the imperial position and its characters shines through Josephus' autobiography, and their weakness is reflected by Josephus' superiority' (175). She suggests, moreover, that it was especially his fellow Judeans, particularly those in the city of Rome, who would have been especially interested in this celebration of 'arguably one of the more successful Judeans in recent history' (175).[20] This prompts further thoughts about Josephus' audience, which is often unhelpfully limited to one group or another, either Romans or (less commonly) Judeans. Instead, Grojnowski convincingly argues for different audiences 'equipped with differing levels of mental libraries' (177), each of which would have responded differently to various aspects of his work.

One of the lingering questions prompted by this study is to what extent Josephus was aware of the writings that are examined as predecessors. Grojnowski deals with this question briefly in this final chapter, focusing especially on the possibility that Josephus was familiar with and drew from the lost autobiography of Claudius (179–81). This section raises even more questions, a mark not of the weakness but of the strength of this study. For example, some of the literary predecessors analysed in this book were written in Latin (e.g., Caesar's *Gallic War*) and, while it is clear that Josephus was familiar with Livy's history of Rome (see *Antiquities* 14.68), his knowledge of Latin has often been dismissed without careful investigation.[21] Work remains to be done. Questions could be asked of all the literary works that receive attention in the comparative sections: was their influence direct or indirect? And how would we establish this? Grojnowski has indeed provided us with fruitful avenues of research to pursue, which was her aim: 'It is my hope that the conclusions of this study and the implications, including especially the re-reading of *Life*, sketched out briefly in the final chapter, will launch new investigations into the text and our perception of Josephus' (183).

[19] Building on Mason (2005b) 243–88.

[20] On Josephus' possible relationship with the Judean community in Rome, see Den Hollander (2014) 293–304.

[21] The skepticism of Thackeray regarding Josephus' facility in Latin seems to have had a lasting impact. He attributed similarities in Josephus' writings to Virgil and Sallust to the work of assistants (see Joseph. *Ap.* 1.50); Thackeray (1926) xviii–xix; Thackeray (1929) 71–2, 100–24; but see Feldman (1998) 295–6; Ward (2007) 632–49.

This careful study of *Life* advances our understanding on multiple fronts. By applying the insights of genre theory, Grojnowski answers with greater precision questions that have been addressed before. The categorisation of *Life* as autobiography has never been on firmer ground. Her work is an example, then, of the benefits to be reaped by applying methodological tools or theories developed elsewhere to ancient texts. As a New Testament professor, I am reminded of the fruits borne by the application of linguistics and discourse analysis to New Testament texts, which often yield penetrating new insights or confirm what has already been established.[22] I am grateful for scholars who familiarise themselves with these often quite technical fields and then allow the rest of us to benefit as they apply their methodologies to specific texts.

In her extensive use of comparative literature that spans centuries and includes many Greek and Roman authors, Grojnowski also builds on the growing recognition over the last few decades that Josephus belongs in all our historical and historiographical investigations of the first-century world, whether our focus is on Greek, Roman, and/or Judean culture. Placing his writings against the backdrop of the wealth of Greek and Roman literature that has survived provides us with a more intimate understanding of both the historian himself and his literary output, as demonstrated not only here, but also in other recent books by Davies, Edwards, and Glas.[23] In this way scholarship on Josephus' writings is benefiting greatly from many rich investigations of Greco-Roman literature, even as it has from the careful study of scriptural traditions in the Judean context.[24] It is to be hoped that the reverse will also prove true, namely, that studies such as these on Josephus' writings will be helpful for scholars working on texts that have always fit comfortably within the canon of Greco-Roman literature.[25] Josephus has much to contribute. He belongs not only among fellow Judeans like Philo of Alexandria and the gospel writer Luke, nor only among Greek historians such as Thucydides

[22] E.g., Runge (2010); Scacewater (2020).

[23] Esp. Davies (2023); Edwards (2023); Glas (2024).

[24] Esp. Feldman (1998).

[25] To that end, it is worth noting the series within which some of these recent books have been published: Grojnowski in Bloomsbury's 'Education, Literary Culture, and Religious Practice in the Ancient World'; Davies in the 'Oxford Classical Monographs'; and Glas in Brill's 'Historiography of Rome and Its Empire'. Hopefully they will attract broader attention by their inclusion in these more general series.

and Polybius, but also among his contemporary Roman authors like Suetonius and Tacitus. As one who lived at the intersection of cultures, Josephus provides endless material for profitable enquiry.

WILLIAM DEN HOLLANDER
Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary wdenhollander@crts.ca

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bilde, P. (1988) *Flavius Josephus Between Jerusalem and Rome: His Life, His Works and Their Importance* (Sheffield).

Burridge, R. A. (2004) *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids).

Cohen, S. J. D. (2002) *Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His* Vita *and Development as a Historian* (Leiden).

Davies, J. (2023) *Representing the Dynasty in Flavian Rome: The Case of Josephus'* Jewish War (Oxford).

Den Hollander, W. (2014) *Josephus, the Emperors, and the City of Rome: From Hostage to Historian* (Leiden).

Edwards, D. (2023) *In the Court of the Gentiles: Narrative, Exemplarity, and Scriptural Adaptation in the Court-Tales of Flavius Josephus* (Leiden).

Feldman, L. H. (1998) *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (Leiden).

Fowler, A. (1985) *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford).

Frow, J. (2014) *Genre* (New York).

Glas, E. (2024) *Flavius Josephus' Self-Characterization in First-Century Rome: A Historiographical Analysis of Autobiographical Discourse in the* Judean War (Leiden).

Judd, A. (2024) *Modern Genre Theory: An Introduction for Biblical Studies* (Grand Rapids).

Laqueur, R. (1920) *Der jüdische Historiker Flavius Josephus: Ein biographischer Versuch auf neuer quellenkritischer Grundlage* (Gießen).

Mason, S. (1998) 'An Essay in Character: The Aim and Audience of Josephus' *Vita*', in F. Siegert and J. U. Kalms, edd., *Internationales Josephus-Kolloquium Münster 1997: Vorträge aus dem Institutum Judaicum Delitzschianum* (Münster) 31–77.

—— (2001) *Life of Josephus* (Leiden).

—— (2005a) 'Of Audience and Meaning: Reading Josephus' *Bellum Judaicum* in the Context of a Flavian Audience', in J. Sievers and G. Lembi, edd., *Josephus and Jewish History in Flavian Rome and Beyond* (Leiden) 71–100.

—— (2005b) 'Figured Speech and Irony in T. Flavius Josephus', in J. Edmondson, S. Mason, and J. Rives, edd. *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome* (Oxford) 243–88.

—— (2015) 'Josephus's *Judean War*', in H. H. Chapman and Z. Rodgers, edd., *A Companion to Josephus* (Chichester) 13–35.

Rajak, T. (1973) 'Justus of Tiberias', *CQ* 23: 345–68.

Runge, S. (2010) *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids).

Scacewater, T., ed. (2020) *Discourse Analysis of the New Testament Writings* (Dallas).
Thackeray, H. St. J. (1926) *Josephus: Vol. 2, The Jewish War, Books I–III* (Cambridge).
—— (1929) *Josephus: The Man and the Historian* (New York).
Ward, J. S. (2007) 'Roman Greek: Latinisms in the Greek of Flavius Josephus', *CQ* 57: 632–49.
Whitmarsh, T. (2005) *The Second Sophistic* (Oxford).