



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2016.05.01

William den Hollander, *Josephus, the Emperors, and the City of Rome: From Hostage to Historian*. Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 86. Leiden: Brill, 2014. ISBN 978-90-04-26433-5. Pp. xii + 410, color ill. € 122 / \$149. Hardback.

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This monograph, a revised version of den Hollander's 2012 doctoral dissertation from York University, Toronto, is a fresh take on the complex issue of Josephus' social standing and the extent of his relationship to the Flavian emperors and other influential people in and around Rome in the latter half of the first century CE—or as the author puts it: “What were the circumstances of Josephus' social life in the city of Rome?” (305). This deceptively simple question has proven a tough nut to crack for contemporary scholarship on Josephus. Den Hollander tries his best to examine this problem.

Den Hollander's comprehensive analysis is spread out over six chapters, which together cover the period from Josephus' early visit to Rome in 63-66 CE and through to the latter part of Domitian's rule in the 90's. This chronological framework provides the author with the means of sketching out in great detail the last four decades of Josephus' life. The monograph also includes a short conclusion, a bibliography (more on this below) and three indices (ancient names and places, modern authors as well as an *index locorum*).

The first chapter, *Introduction: Josephus in Rome* (2-26), is introduced by a by-the-numbers short account of Josephus' life with several references to his *Life* throughout (1-6). This is followed by an extensive overview of current (and past) scholarship on Josephus with particular emphasis on his social standing in Rome (7-18). As den Hollander's analysis shows, this is a well-trodden research field, which (at least) dates back to the works of such scholars as Richard Laqueur and H. St. J. Thackeray in the 1920's. In more recent decades, it has been extensively studied by a number of prominent scholars including Hannah Cotton, Werner Eck, Gohei Hata, Martin Goodman and Tessa Rajak.¹ One of the main points of contention in current scholarship on Josephus concerns the extent to which he was a marginalized figure during his time in Rome. This is for instance evidenced in two 2005 anthologies, which are edited by Sievers and Lembi

¹ Den Hollander says of the latter's *Josephus: The Man and the Historian* (1983) and her other contributions that they “have served in many cases as foundational for my study” (13). Similarly, den Hollander counts as his PhD supervisors two of the foremost figures in contemporary scholarship on Josephus, namely Steve Mason and Jonathan Edmonson. By the author's own admission, the former left “an unmistakable mark on this monograph, as will be immediately evident from the footnotes” (ix). And it certainly shows! But more on this issue below.

and Edmonson, Mason, and Rives, respectively.² The latter contains an article by Cotton and Eck³ in which the authors argue that Josephus stood at a great distance from the Flavian court, a view that den Hollander himself seems to share. For, as he notes on a later occasion, “(t)he conclusion of Cotton and Eck that Josephus was in all likelihood isolated from the socio-political elite is, therefore, apposite, also in light of our examination of Josephus’ relationship to the emperors” (285). However, he does not share their opinion that Josephus was an entirely isolated figure (e.g. 18 and 286). Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the position of Cotton and Eck has been heavily criticized by other scholars in recent years.⁴

Den Hollander concludes the first chapter with an account of his own methodology and a sketching out of the content of the subsequent five chapters (18-26). In his section on methodology, he wrestles with the problem of not having other evidence than the words of Josephus himself on which to base an analysis of his social circumstances in Rome. According to den Hollander however, this should not be considered a drawback; for “it is not only possible but also profitable to evaluate the claims made by Josephus and the narrative picture he provides against the ancient backdrop, by presenting general conditions and placing him within his historical environment, which in turns allows us to imagine the possibilities” (19). This is precisely what den Hollander sets out to do in the following four chapters with his comprehensive study of Josephus’ connections with the three Flavian emperors (in chronological order) “in order to establish as comprehensively as possible the parameters of each relationship” (68). This constitutes “an approach that”, as den Hollander proclaims, “has not yet been taken in Josephan scholarship” (68).

In the second chapter, entitled *Yosef ben Mattityahu in Neronian Rome* (27-67), den Hollander sketches out the historical and cultural context for Josephus’ first visit to Rome in the middle of the 60’s CE. In the initial half of the chapter, the author attempts to properly date Josephus’ stay there and to pinpoint its exact length. In his autobiography, Josephus reports that he suffered a shipwreck on his way to the capital (*Life* 13-16). Den Hollander uses this information to argue that “[a] sea voyage over the autumn months . . . is an attractive possibility” (33), since sea travel at that time of year was particularly dangerous. He compares this to Paul’s shipwreck (as reported in Acts 27-28), which also took place in the autumn (compare, for example, 52-53, 78 and 80). Subsequently, he notes that “the shipwreck . . . had become a popular narrative *topos* in ancient literature” 34), referencing among others Homer’s *Odyssey* (5.282-423) and Suetonius’ biography of Augustus (8.1), but does not give pause to consider if Josephus’ account of his own shipwreck could to be considered a literary fabrication. In connection with his analysis of Josephus’ return to Judaea, den Hollander does, however, stress that “[w]e must simply be wary of placing too much weight on Josephus’ chronology of events; he was, after all, writing some thirty years after the events unfolded” (37). The latter half of this chapter focuses on Josephus’ contacts and connections in Rome, including his amicable relationship to Nero’s second wife Poppaea (46-65).

In the third chapter, simply entitled *Josephus and Vespasian* (68-138), den Hollander analyses Josephus’ interactions with Vespasian during his time as a Roman prisoner. As he (correctly) argues, Josephus’ account of his imprisonment in the *War* (3.392) and in the *Life* (414) is highly rhetorical. This leads him to conclude, “we cannot adequately assess Josephus’ time in captivity from the narrative accounts alone” (73). Indeed, he subsequently argues that “Josephus’ time in the Roman camp may [notice den Hollander’s use of hedging – more on this below] have provided little opportunity, therefore, for contact between the two,

² Cf. J. Sievers and G. Lembi, eds., *Josephus and Jewish History* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) and J. Edmonson, S. Mason and J. Rives, eds. *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³ Cotton and Eck, “Josephus’ Roman Audience: Josephus and the Roman Elites,” in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, 37-52.

⁴ This is for instance the case in a recent article by John Curran, “Flavius Josephus in Rome,” in *Flavius Josephus: Interpretation and History* (ed. J. Pastor, P. Stern and M. Mor; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 65-86 (69 in particular), to which den Hollander himself refers (but does not cite directly) on five other occasions (15 n. 70; 253 n. 11; 294 n. 245 and 247, and 198 n. 268).

let alone time for a meaningful relationship to develop” (84, also 90 and 101-102). For the historian’s depiction of this period is not to be taken at face value. In fact, by comparing his account with the general nature of such imprisonments in antiquity one may arrive at the notion “that Josephus’ tenure as prisoner was much more commonplace than he suggests” (73).

In the first part of this chapter, den Hollander focuses on the physical nature of Josephus’ captivity and the subsequent ceremonial severing of his chains and a removal of the stigma commonly associated with such imprisonment in antiquity (73-91). Den Hollander posits that, “[s]uch connotations of shame and disgrace Josephus may be seeking to remove from himself during his time in Rome, perhaps especially shortly after his arrival given the prominence of these themes in his *War*” (89-90).

In the subsequent part of the chapter, den Hollander concerns himself with Josephus’ prophetic prediction (*War* 3.399-408) that Vespasian was later to become emperor (91-105). Den Hollander demonstrates that Josephus’ account of this episode is (again) highly rhetorical and concludes, “(t)o arrive at a reliable historical account of this event simply on the basis of his narratives is impossible” (94). He does, however, point out that this episode fits well with the general Roman predilection for divine predictions and portents (96-100).

Den Hollander then turns to an analysis of Josephus’ function (but *not* his capabilities) as a historian. He dismisses entirely the oft-repeated assumption that Josephus may have served as an official court-historian (e.g. 106, 109, 136 and 187). Instead, den Hollander “would place the emperors on the fringes of Josephus’ literary circle” (117-118). For, as he continues, “(t)he preponderance of external evidence would suggest. . . that Josephus as historian had little to do with Vespasian as emperor” (119, also 183).

In the final part of this chapter dealing with Josephus’ status as an imperial client, den Hollander (somewhat unsurprisingly perhaps) reaches a similar conclusion, namely, that the distance between Josephus and the emperor was greater than the former would have us believe and that “Josephus was treated no more favorably than a typical client of the imperial house” (122, also 137). In accordance with his dismissal of Josephus’ function as court historian, den Hollander also finds that the financial support that he received from Vespasian had little to no connection with his literary efforts (124).

The fourth chapter, *Josephus and Titus* (139-199), focuses on Josephus’ relationship with Vespasian’s son and successor, Titus. Judging by the former’s account, one could get the impression that there existed a rather close bond between these figures. In the early part of the 70’s CE, Josephus might well have been in close physical proximity to the prominent Roman (141). This, however, does not mean that they had developed an intimate rapport. Rather, den Hollander argues that Josephus generally stood at some distance from Titus (163 and 179-180). On occasion, Josephus might well have served as an informant and as mediator between the Romans and the Jewish rebels. However, as den Hollander shows, his position and function were by no means wholly unique. For the Romans often relied on intelligence provided for them by prisoners and deserters (157-162). Therefore “we cannot argue on the basis of his involvement in the campaign that a close relationship developed between the Judean ex-prisoner and the Roman general” (163).

As for the *beneficia* given him by Titus (such as some sacred Jewish books and a plot of land), den Hollander holds that each of them “is readily understandable within the context of a military campaign and belongs, therefore, to Josephus’ time in the Roman camp. They illustrate little as far as his circumstances while residing in Rome are concerned” (178). Thus, according to den Hollander, one should be careful not to misconstrue the privileges provided by Vespasian and Titus as emblematic of an intimate connection with the Jewish ex-prisoner.

The latter part of this chapter comprises an in-depth analysis of the portrait of Titus in the *War*. Here, den Hollander entertains the notions that Josephus’ depiction of the Flavian general could be seen as highly

ironic, for “[u]nder the cover of obsequious flattery” he “succeeds in creating a less than flattering portrait [sic] of Titus” (190).

In the fifth and pen-ultimate chapter, *Josephus and Domitian* (200-251), den Hollander analyses Josephus’ relationship with the last of the Flavians, Domitian. Josephus says of him that he “added to my honours”, intervened on his behalf in cases brought against him by his “Jewish accusers” and provided him with tax exemption (*Life* 249). In his analysis of these benefactions, den Hollander shows that they conform to those of the two preceding emperors, and concludes that Domitian was merely pursuing the same path set forth by his predecessors (211-5). He even posits that the aforementioned tax exemption might have come about by Josephus’ own initiative (219).

He also argues that Domitian’s attitude towards the Jews “must have had an impact on the parameters of a relationship between the Judaeian historian and Domitian” (231). This chapter therefore also contains an analysis of Domitian’s anti-Jewish policies and the *fiscus Judaicus* in particular. Here, den Hollander rightly argues that Josephus’ *Antiquities* from Domitian’s point of view could be considered “subversive literature” (245), since it was written for an audience who was sympathetic towards the Jewish people and shared an interest in Jewish history, customs, and religious beliefs. Here too den Hollander stresses that Josephus did not serve as (un)officially appointed court historian for any of the three Flavian emperors (251).

The final chapter, *Josephus and the Inhabitants of Rome* (252-304), focuses on other influential figures (outside the Flavian emperors) with which Josephus might have come into contact during the last thirty years of his life. These include the various Roman generals, the Herodians, other prominent individuals (including his patron Epaphroditus) as well as the Jews living in the Roman diaspora at that time. Concerning Josephus’ Roman peers, den Hollander argues that they must have “consisted largely of those whose names would not have resonated with Josephus’ readers and were thus not recorded” (263). As for the Herodians, he posits that the historian “may well have relied heavily . . . upon the services of Agrippa II in circulating the *War* among the many contacts he had made in the city of Rome” (268). Yet, “it would be misleading to include Agrippa II within Josephus’ social circle” (274). Of Agrippa’s sister, Berenice, with whom Titus at one point was romantically involved, den Hollander argues that she “would have been an attractive figure for Josephus to solicit as far as the publication and dissemination of his works were concerned” (277-8). Finally, den Hollander notes that the ever-elusive Epaphroditus would have been far removed from the imperial court if he was not one of the imperial freedmen (285).

Den Hollander’s monograph is well researched and written. His grasp, choice, and treatment of his primary sources are all exemplary. His frequent use of sign posting is likewise commendable. Similarly, he regularly includes references to relevant discussions in contemporary scholarship in the footnotes. Regarding footnotes, den Hollander often inserts lengthy quotations from the writings of Josephus and a host of other ancient authors (e.g., Suetonius, Cassius Dio, and Paul) in their original Greek or Latin in the footnotes. In some instances, these quotations correspond to passages cited in the main text in an English translation. It would have been preferable to have inserted the relevant Greek or Latin phrases in parentheses in the main text thereby avoiding such unnecessarily long notes.

Despite den Hollander’s eloquence, the monograph does suffer from the occasional typo and unclear phrasing. For instance, a quote from *War* 3.438 has incorrectly been given as 3.348 (72, n. 14). Similarly, in the introduction, he characterizes Josephus’ *Antiquities* as “a complete account of the history of people creation until the outbreak of the revolt, thus substantially a reworking of the Biblical narrative” (5). But what does Hollander mean by “substantially”? What are we to make of the latter half of the *Antiquities* with its account of events that are not mentioned in the Old Testament scriptures?

The bibliography is extensive and up-to-date. One minor point, however, is worth mentioning here. As is standard practice, the bibliography is divided into two sections on ancient manuscripts (in their original language and in modern translations) and secondary literature, respectively. But for whatever reason,

commentaries on the ancient works are also placed in the first section. Thus for instance, Steve Mason's 2001 commentary on and translation of Josephus' *Life* (a monograph to which den Hollander frequently refers) is placed in the first section and not alongside Mason's other articles and monographs. On occasion, this makes for a somewhat confusing reference system.

Finally, any monograph on the life of Josephus must necessarily engage in some manner of historical reconstruction. In many cases, such studies suffer from the limitations (or even outright lack) of direct evidence. In his writings, Josephus himself has a lot to say concerning his relationship with the Flavians. Yet, den Hollander rightfully holds that we should not take the historian's accounts of such matters at face value, steeped as they are in rhetorical commonplaces and even the occasional irony. Therefore, den Hollander cannot rely on the works of Josephus alone. Thus, the writings of such diverse authors as Paul, Plutarch, Luke, Suetonius and Galen are brought to bear on an analysis of the socio-historical circumstances in Rome and ultimately on Josephus' relationship with the Flavian emperors. For sceptics (this reviewer included) this demands a high degree of suspension of disbelief. In order for den Hollander's reconstruction to appear believable and persuasive, the reader must be willing to venture into the realm of probabilities and inferences. Indeed, in den Hollander's analysis there are plenty of 'possibilities' (e.g., 66-67, 219, 255), "likelihoods" (e.g., 40, 60), 'scenarios' (e.g. 57, 60), "plausibilities" (e.g., 58 and 260) and references to what is "reasonable" (e.g., 62). In general though, his argumentation is compelling (if a bit too speculative at times) and his manner of presentation is altogether pleasing.

This monograph is a significant contribution to contemporary scholarship and will undoubtedly prove to be an enjoyable read for anyone interested in Josephus and the Flavian emperors.