



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2016.10.11

Michael Avioz, *Josephus' Interpretation of the Books of Samuel*. Library of Second Temple Studies 86. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. ISBN: 9780567608802. Pp. v + 254. \$112.00. Hardback.

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While recent decades have seen an increase in the scholarly attention paid to portions of Josephus's rewriting of biblical texts, relatively few works have taken up the challenging but important task of analyzing his rewriting of an entire biblical book. Prompted in part by this deficit, Michael Avioz sets out to present a more holistic analysis of Josephus's rewriting of 1-2 Samuel. He highlights what he refers to as Josephus's "interpretive intuition" (203) in order to discuss more fully Josephus's role as an exegete. He argues that Josephus is important not only as a historian and an apologist, but also as an interpreter of the Bible.

Avioz divides his monograph into three main sections. Part one includes chapters one and two and presents the major arguments and methodological approach of the work. A brief review of previous scholarship is also given, along with a short overview of the way in which Josephus revises the narrative transitions in 1–2 Samuel (14–20). The author makes the case that a renewed investigation of the "rewritten Bible" portions of Josephus's works calls for two important shifts in methodology. First, Avioz points out the shortcoming in what he terms an "atomistic" analysis, which he finds present in much of previous scholarship (8). Such an analysis suffers from a decontextualized formulation of Josephus's interpretations of biblical events and characters. It fails to properly contextualize Josephus's interpretations because it fails to consult first the historical-critical works of modern biblical interpretation. The author notes, for example, that not a single modern biblical scholar or commentary is consulted in Louis Feldman's analysis of Josephus's rewriting of biblical narratives (10). In contrast, Avioz proposes an approach that first analyzes the biblical text from a historical-critical perspective before analyzing the redactional activity of Josephus. Secondly, the author calls for a more nuanced categorization of Josephus's rewriting of the Bible, which is often broadly labeled as apologetic. Not enough work has been done to demonstrate Josephus's abilities as an exegete and Avioz seeks to fill this gap. After providing functional definitions of the terms "apologetic" and "exegetical," he argues that the motivations of the ancient historian are multifaceted and one can and should distinguish between Josephus's apologetic and exegetical motives whenever possible (5–7).

Part two includes chapters three and four, which constitute the bulk of the work and deal with the Saul and David narratives. In chapter three the author analyzes Josephus's rewriting of the Saul narratives (*Ant.* 6.45–378) that are (sometimes-sparsely) present in 1 Samuel 9–31. The author notes that Josephus keeps the order of the MT and includes all the major scenes of Saul's story, only making minor omissions. Avioz then compares these major scenes as they appear in 1 Samuel and in the *Antiquities* in order to discern the exegetical moves Josephus makes (23–54). The Josephan portrait of Saul that emerges is dual-sided. On the

one hand, Avioz points out the ways in which Josephus presents a positive portrait of Saul. When Saul is chosen by lot as the first king over Israel, he is portrayed by Josephus as a model of modesty and virtue (28). Josephus also expands upon and embellishes the details of Saul's military career and calls him a *strategos* (or general), an epithet not ascribed to Saul in the biblical text (31). Most conspicuously, in his encomium, Josephus characterizes Saul as "a uniquely just, courageous and prudent man" (54).

Despite such positive portrayals of Saul, however, Avioz suggests that the overall attitude of Josephus toward Saul is negative at worst and ambivalent at best. The author shows that in several places, Josephus puts forward negative estimations of the character of Saul. Whereas scholars like Feldman have argued that Josephus seeks to depict Saul as wise, Avioz sees no compelling reason to agree and puts forward several arguments to the contrary (31). For example, in *Ant.* 6.262–267, Josephus adds to the biblical text a scathing appraisal of Saul's actions concerning the trial and execution of Ahimelech in 1 Samuel 22 (44). Here Josephus condemns Saul as an unjust king who is not able to exercise prudence and wisdom in matters of justice. Under Josephus's pen Saul is also guilty of "overstepping the boundaries between church and state," because of his decision to make a sacrifice, a sacred duty reserved only for the prophet-priest Samuel (35). Josephus also draws the conclusion that Saul's downfall is caused by his own failures to obey God's commandments (55). As for the encomium, Avioz suggests that it is possible Josephus includes it in his depiction of Saul only because the encomium is a common literary device employed by ancient historians and rhetoricians (54). He even implies that it is possible to read the encomium ironically (56). In the end, however, while his discussion of Josephus's Saul is fruitful, Avioz's concluding remarks on the topic are somewhat unclear: he asserts both that Josephus ultimately portrays Saul negatively *and* that Josephus is ambivalent in his portrayal of Saul (56). The evidence seems to support the latter view.

In chapter four, the author takes up the task of analyzing Josephus's rewriting of the David narratives found in 1-2 Samuel and 1 Kings 1-2 (*Ant.* 6.157–7.394). Covering all the major episodes in the David narratives, this chapter takes up a significant portion of the book. It is in the David narratives that Avioz locates the more salient demonstrations of Josephus's exegetical abilities. He asserts that "changes motivated by apologetic reasons are far outnumbered by changes of an exegetical nature" (164). For instance, 2 Samuel 7 opens abruptly with the remark that David wants to build a house for the ark of God and the prophet Nathan encourages him to proceed. But David's desire to build this house is later rejected by God for reasons not explicitly accounted for in 2 Samuel 7 (108). Josephus attempts to iron out this wrinkle in the narrative by defending the prophetic dignity of Nathan, noting that Nathan's encouragement was based on what God had accomplished through David in the past and thus a valid counsel for the prophet to make at the time. Moreover, Josephus adds that God condones David's initiative to build the Temple but only declines his offer to do so because Solomon has already been chosen for that job (109). Second Samuel 7 is also a key text because of another important issue: messianism. Interestingly, Josephus makes no additions to the text and actually omits the songs in Samuel where the word *משיח* appears (189). The author concludes that Josephus's rewriting of the books of Samuel "makes no significant contribution to the unsettled debate" about Josephus's messianic views or lack thereof (191).

Although Josephus's exegetical aptitude is demonstrated by his harmonizing, clarifying, and embellishing of the biblical text, Avioz notes that the ancient exegete fails to comment on geographical sites mentioned after 1 Samuel 21 (81). Josephus provides detailed commentary on geography in his other works (e.g. the *War* and the *Life*), but such a mastery of the geography of Judea and the surrounding areas is absent in the *Antiquities*. Avioz suggests that Josephus's lack of notes on geography might be due to the fact that his audience for the *Antiquities* was Jewish while his audience for his other works was largely non-Jewish (82). While Avioz does a good job highlighting the exegetical moves made by Josephus, his attempt to direct the spotlight away from Josephus's apologetic revisions at times takes away from the substance of his analysis. For example, the clearly-apologetic omission of David's genealogy in his rewriting of 1 Samuel is noted by the author but then passed over without commentary (58).

Part three of the book includes chapters five and six, with chapter five providing an overview of a few of Josephus's exegetical techniques and chapter six making some concluding remarks. As the author demonstrates, double narratives were one type of the exegetical problems faced by Josephus. Avioz shows the way in which Josephus goes about resolving the issue of doublets: sometimes he omits them, other times he synthesizes them and still other times he treats each one of the double narratives as a separate story (168). The issue of doublets also surfaces when Josephus has to deal with the books of Chronicles, which he does not present in his *Antiquities* as a separate book. Instead, he employs several exegetical methods and incorporates materials from the books of Chronicles into his rewriting of the books of Samuel (176). At times Josephus favors the narratives found in the books of Samuel but at other points he is partial to Chronicles and sometimes he follows neither one of his sources (182).

Avioz's findings are welcomed contributions to the growing body of scholarly work that has been done in the category of "rewritten Bible" within Second Temple studies. His close comparisons of the biblical text with Josephus's rewritings attempt to strike a good balance between breadth and depth. Unfortunately, the depth of the findings suffers as a result of the breadth of the project. While the author identifies many interesting points of contrast (and parallels) between Josephus and the biblical text, he allots small space to their critical discussion. However, Avioz's success in calling attention to Josephus's exegetical (as opposed to apologetic) strategies does raise some important questions, such as, how should one determine Josephus's editorial activity to be exegetical over against apologetic and whether or not these two categories are mutually exclusive. Raising such questions and more, the author's work enriches the study of Josephus by advocating a more nuanced understanding of the motivations of the ancient historian and exegete. Because he often defended himself with his pen after losing his sword at Jotapata, scholarship has tended to view Josephus as an apologist *in perpetuum*. Avioz's call to avoid this tendency is instructive.