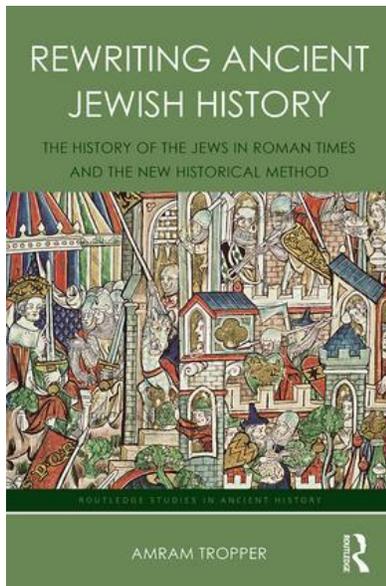




### *Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2017.02.03*

**Amram Tropper, *Rewriting Ancient Jewish History: The History of the Jews in Roman Times and the New Historical Method*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016. ISBN: 1138641480. Pp. viii + 220. \$140.00. Hardback.**

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As I sat down to write this review, I could not but think of Prof. Jacob Neusner who recently passed away.<sup>1</sup> I received my training from Hebrew University and Prof. Neusner was not popular in my academic circles in the 1970s (and afterwards). However, if there was anybody who was instrumental in causing the collapse of traditional accounts of the history of the Jews in the Mishnah and Talmud periods and subsequently in suggesting new methodologies for the understanding, and not necessarily historical understanding, of the relevant traditions of the rabbis, then it was him. He was not alone, and others discovered similar problems with the historical basis of rabbinic literature and offered similar solutions, often at exactly the same time, but Neusner was certainly the most prolific of the lot. Since Neusner's early work in the 1970s, new methodologies have continued to push the boundaries of scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Thus, I looked forward with great expectation and interest to the book under review. Would the discipline once again undergo great upheavals in the wake of the newly unveiled methodologies?

At about the same time that the old historical methods—the classical historical-philological approach, the traditionalist approach, the historical kernel Jerusalem school approach *et al.*—were coming under attack, in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, Oxford professor Fergus Millar wrote

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/11/us/jacob-neusner-judaic-scholar-who-forged-interfaith-bonds-dies-at-84.html> (last retrieved on November 21, 2016); <http://www.timesofisrael.com/jacob-neusner-renowned-jewish-scholar-dies-at-84/> (last retrieved on November 21, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001). (Disclosure: we are brothers. We agree on some matters of history and disagree on others).

the following: “Those who study and teach the history of the Ancient World suffer from a great disadvantage ... in a perfectly literal sense we do not know what we are talking about.”<sup>3</sup> Not much has changed since Millar wrote those poignant words and in spite of all the new methodologies. The “history” of the Jews in the Mishnah and Talmud period can still be defined as the “great unknown.” Where does this leave the study of Amram Tropper? Before we answer that, it is necessary to understand what he is attempting to do.

The book begins with a methodological introduction that briefly maps out what the author intends to study and relates to at least one potential audience for the book, the general public. The new historical method is often unknown to the public, states Tropper, and is still debated in scholarly circles. While some basic assumptions of the new method have been accepted by a majority of historians, others have gained less traction. There remain “old school” historians working with 19th century philological-historical methods who work as if nothing has changed and the present study by Tropper serves as a foil for their outdated methodologies. The author does not consider his book a retrospective of a *fait accompli* but rather part of an ongoing methodological process, a work in progress.

The book is divided into four main parts: authenticity, hermeneutics, credibility, and conclusion. The first three are the prongs of the historian’s craft that Tropper sets up as the basis for his new methodology. Each part contains a description of the relevant traditionalist approach, a critique, followed by a discussion of the new historical method designed to overcome the flaws of the old school.

Part I (“Authenticity”) has only one chapter (“Can Multiple Versions be Equally Authentic?”) which analyzes the dominant methodology of the more traditional schools of textual criticism, which tend to see multiple versions of a text as equally authentic, independent reflections of a no longer existent and unattested precursor. The author calls this the “independent parallels method.” While Tropper makes reference at the beginning of the chapter to the numerous types of source material available during the Second Temple, Mishnaic, and Talmudic times, what he really examines are issues of textual criticism relevant to rabbinic literature.<sup>4</sup> Tropper introduces the “edited parallels method” which tentatively reconstructs the earliest and most authentic versions of our sources and also manages to weed out many sources that this method considers as non-authentic, as opposed to the independent parallels method that greatly expands the corpus of seemingly authentic traditions. The discussion is technical, very important, and will undoubtedly arouse much discussion in the rather circumscribed world of rabbinic text criticism.

Part II (“Hermeneutics”) also contains only one chapter (“The Rabbis as Unusual Romans”). Traditional hermeneutics, according to Tropper, is internal. One who adopts such a method reads Jewish texts in Hebrew and Aramaic in light of the immediate Jewish setting alone. This perforce limits the understanding of the sources and their cultural world. The hermeneutics of the new historical method directs us to situate ancient Jewish sources in a broad historical and cultural setting. Jewish society in Roman times should be understood in light of the Roman world or the

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<sup>3</sup> Fergus Millar, “The World of the Golden Ass,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 71 (1981): 63–75.

<sup>4</sup> The author here is mostly in conversation with the late Prof. Eliezer Shimshon Rosenthal of the Talmud Department of Hebrew University. See, e.g., Eliezer Shimshon Rosenthal, “The History of the Text and Problems of Redaction in the Study of the Babylonian Talmud,” *Tarbiz* 57 (1987): 1–36 (Hebrew).

Iranian world. The author is absolutely correct. It is hard to understand, though, what is new about this. There is nary a traditionalist (apart from the non-academic Yeshiva world) who would today read these sources in such an insular manner. Moreover, scholars have for decades now been studying Jewish material in light of the Graeco-Roman and Iranian worlds.<sup>5</sup>

The bulk of the book, six chapters, is in Part III (“Credibility”). The first chapter in this part (Chapter 3: “An Introduction to Credibility: On Sources, Credibility, and Corroboration”) lays out the theoretical framework for the investigation of the credibility of sources in the traditional schools of historical analysis. These schools essentially still presume that ancient Jewish texts faithfully preserved their sources and that they, as well as their underlying sources, are reliable historical reports. In this section Tropper makes particular use of his edited parallels approach mentioned above to show that parallel or similar versions cannot serve as corroborating evidence for a particular tradition. He also lays out the particulars of his methodology such as that historians must first examine the literary dimension of the ancient source, or before distilling credible information from a source one must understand what the source is saying and by what rules it is playing. Once again, one cannot but agree with the author here. He is absolutely correct. It is harder, however and once again, to understand what exactly is new about much of this.

The following two chapters tackle the reliability and credibility of Josephus. The first of these, Chapter 4 (“Recovering Josephus’s Sources”) relates to how Josephus dealt with earlier sources. Tropper analyzes Josephus’s account of the biblical episode of Hagar (Gen 16) in *Ant.* 1.186–191. He shows how Josephus completely revamped the story creating a new preface and happy ending. Sarai is painted in a more favorable light and Hagar in a less favorable one. Josephus condensed, interpreted, revised, eliminated, and much more, and all of this is generally indicative of Josephus’s rewritten bible. Next Tropper shows what Josephus does with 1 Macc 4:1–6, depicting the surprise attack of the Seleucid general Gorgias against Judah Maccabee and his army at Mitzpeh in 165 BCE (cf. *Ant.* 12.305–307). Josephus is shown to be not only paraphrasing but rather to be recasting his sources. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know what is credible in the differences between the sources and what Josephus is inventing. The same characteristics are found in relation to Josephus’s rewriting of material from Nicolaus of Damascus. Josephus preserves the literary core of his sources, and, thus, the credibility of Josephus’s literary core is ultimately dependent on the reliability of his sources and their sources.

Chapter 5 (“Josephus and History”) examines the methodologies of Josephus in light of Greco-Roman historiography due to the willingness of ancient historians to embellish or sometimes invent facts to make their case or presentation more convincing. Tropper shows that these historians, in spite of these embellishments, remained faithful to “general outlines.” Reducing historical accounts to their minimal plotlines serve as a model for a backdoor route, as it were, to credible material in Josephus. It is possible to move back to the facts through the literary core. Tropper tries out his methodology on two complex depictions, the account of the publication of

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<sup>5</sup> For early examples, see Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1942) and *idem*, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1950). See also Daniel Sperber, *Material Culture in Eretz-Israel during the Talmudic Period* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi and Bar-Ilan, 1993 [vol.I], 2006 [vol. II]). Sperber deals with Talmudic realia and within the background of the classical world, a *sine qua non*, for the understanding of this literature for any purpose, including historical. On the Iranian world see, e.g., Shai Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in its Sasanian Context* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2014).

*The Jewish War* and the fall of Masada. Regarding the latter, for example, Tropper shows how it is possible to determine that basic core of Josephus's account accurately depicts the fall of Masada, as is also clear from the corroborating archaeological evidence, while it is impossible to include the suicide story within that basic core. His methodology in these two chapters does seem quite new and exciting with much potential and, undoubtedly, there will be a good deal of discussion regarding the particulars.

Chapter 6 ("The Traditional Historical Method on the Credibility of Rabbinic Literature") returns to the study of rabbinic literature and picks up the thread from Chapter 3. Once again, we read of the simplistic approach of the traditionalists who seem to accept rabbinic literature at face value in terms of historical credibility. The traditionalists do try to corroborate their sources, and occasionally there are examples of independent, non-rabbinic sources which provide such corroboration. Often the corroboration for both traditionalist and "new historian" comes from a comparison of rabbinic material with material culture.<sup>6</sup> Chapter 7 ("The Collapse of the Traditional Presumptions about Rabbinic Literature") continues the attack on the traditionalists and their belief that rabbinic literature is essentially a reliable tool in the writing of history. Rabbinic sources may say much about social, cultural, material and intellectual matters, but they shed little light on ancient events. In this case, rabbinic literature provides less than Josephus who, after all, wrote history in the Greco-Roman tradition that allowed the back-door approach as discussed above. This is not the case with the rabbis: no back door and certainly no front door when it comes to writing history.

Tropper continues to push the envelope further on this theme in the next chapter (Chapter 8: "The New Historical Method on the Credibility of Rabbinic Literature: Three Case Studies") in which he attempts to show the superiority of his new method through an analysis of three well-known and oft studied sources. The first is the statement of R. Eleazar ben Azariah, "Behold I am about seventy years old" (*Mishnah Berakhot* 1:5 and parallels), explaining why one should recount the exodus story at night. The second relates to R. Hiyya's educational mission (*Bavli Bava Metzia* 85b and parallels), and finally Tropper analyzes the ever-popular Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's escape from Jerusalem (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan B* 6 and numerous parallels) tradition. In each case, Tropper avoids event related history and focuses upon facets of the social, cultural, and intellectual reality refracted through these sources. In each case his readings are fresh and insightful.

Part IV ("Conclusion") has one chapter (Chapter 9: "On Hillel the Elder's Rise to Greatness"). While it might seem strange to introduce new material in the course of a chapter devoted to presenting conclusions, Tropper seeks to illustrate his new method once again through a case study. This time, though, the source he studies, *Bavli Yoma* 35b on Hillel the Elder, allows for a comprehensive analysis of all the elements of the new methodology: authenticity, hermeneutics, and credibility. The Hillel tradition here and in parallels no longer serves the cause of the traditionalists who used it to chart the life of an early sage or the policy of study-houses in Palestine. The story, based on the new methodology, tells nothing of Hillel's biography. Ultimately, what it does do is encourage the Jews in Babylonia to intensify their Torah studies based on the model of a local sage who went up to Palestine, according to the tradition, and

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<sup>6</sup> See the two volumes of Sperber, *ibid.* See also, e.g., Joshua Schwartz, "Ball Playing in Ancient Jewish Society: The Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Periods," *Ludica, annali di storia e civiltà del gioco* 3 (1997): 139–61 and *idem*, "A Child's Cart," *Ludica, annali di storia e civiltà del gioco* 4 (1998): 7–19.

succeeded there beyond expectation. This is not event-oriented history, but rather it is history nonetheless. Just a different type of history.

Tropper has provided us with an important book, but at the same time with a rather strange one, and at times an irritating one. The title and sub-title of the book arouse great expectations. To be honest, those expectations are not met. Yes, there is re-writing of ancient Jewish history. Perhaps it would have been fairer to the reader to write something like “Prolegomena on the Rewriting etc.,” but in fairness to the author, words like “prolegomena” “aspects of,” and so on, are the kiss of death to the “key words” concept of modern-day publishing and marketing. Moreover, Tropper did not write “the history of the Jews in Roman Times” and even if the “*and* the new historical method” is one phrase, here too there are only prolegomena. Tropper, as we remember, writes that the book reflects a methodology in progress, but the bottom line is that the title is not fair to the reader.

Then there is the issue of newness. I constantly kept asking myself for whom Tropper was writing. For me? I was definitely schooled in the traditionalist methodologies. Well, I gave up writing event-oriented history of the period about two and a half decades ago and I was not alone. Tropper, in my view, at least, exaggerates the traditionalist menace and danger. Those few that I know are all retired, many for a long time, and are not at the forefront of the field. As I read and agreed with many aspects of Tropper’s “new” methodology, I realized that I, like many of my colleagues, have been doing this in one form or another for a long time. There is much that is new here in his book, particularly new insights and readings, but the insistence on “new historical method” time and again seems like overkill or overstatement.

Lastly, the book should have been mapped out better. Yes, Tropper explains his prongs of history and has a basic plan but never really explains the mechanics of the book’s structure. His chapters on Josephus, which are excellent, seem like an afterthought, and Tropper does not study any other Jewish source material from the Second Temple period that might be relevant to Roman times.<sup>7</sup> Even if Tropper was writing for the public who might still be under traditionalist sway, he still could have explained in a less sketchy manner what he intends to do.

All in all, though, as Tropper writes and as I have pointed out a number of times, this study is a work in progress. It is an important work and at times a brilliant one. It should be read and studied by both public and specialists, but we still await a history of the Jews in Roman times based on his and/or other new methodologies.

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g. Bezalel Bar-Kochva, “Second Temple-Period Research: Training, Means, Methods and Aims,” *Cathedra* 100 (2001): 121–64.