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TACITUS ON THE JEWS

R. S. BLOCH: *Antike Vorstellungen vom Judentum. Der Judenexkurs des Tacitus im Rahmen der griechisch-römischen Ethnographie.* (Historia Einzelschriften 160.) Pp. 260. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2002. Paper, €15.80. ISBN: 3-515-07664-6.

Bloch has written an exciting and genuinely innovative study. By analysing Tacitus' famous (or infamous) excursus on the Jews (*Historiae* 5.2–13, written A.D. 100–5, p. 129) in the wider context of Tacitean historiography and Greco-Roman ethnographical texts in general, B. meaningfully reintegrates it as a productive case-study of Tacitus' creative techniques as a writer and historian. Previous interpretations of the excursus have inevitably been complicated by the fact that the *Historiae* breaks off at 5.26, which leaves it tottering over a precipice (though B. tentatively reconstructs the missing part of *Historiae* 5 on pp. 116–19, accentuating the likely interplay between the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the reconstruction of the Capitoline temple in Rome). This accident has exacerbated the tendency of many critics to read the excursus as an isolated unit. B. moves away from what he regards as the insoluble question of the sources for the excursus, proposing that Tacitus has blended together several different sources to create his own unique colouring (p. 15).

B.'s first chapter (pp. 17–26) offers a thorough survey of the pre-existing scholarship on Tacitus' Jewish excursus, starting with G. C. Kirchmaier and Ch. Worm in the seventeenth century, who analysed the text from a theological perspective, rather than as an interconnected part of Tacitus' whole work. B. devotes special attention to the important article of Y. Lewy, written in Hebrew in 1943. Lewy accentuates the political aspects of the excursus, arguing that Tacitus is not indulging in a blind outpouring of hatred (cf. B. on pp. 125 and 129), but composes the excursus thoughtfully and with a teleological aim, culminating in Titus' destruction of the temple. My only question is whether the material from this short chapter could have been integrated with Chapter 5, where B. systematically analyses the reception of Tacitus' excursus.

In Chapter 2, B. first examines the Jewish excursus of Hecataeus of Abdera (pp. 29–41), preserved by Diodorus Siculus (40.3.1–8). He acknowledges that the question of how far Diodorus revised Hecataeus' version remains unanswered (p. 29), but seems to remain uneasy about this issue, speculating at various points about how Diodorus perhaps shortened or reformulated the original text. B. sees Hecataeus' version of Moses' foundation of Jerusalem as a colonization narrative, and argues that Greek ethnography at the end of the fourth century B.C. was undergoing intensive changes, triggered by the conquests of Alexander the Great, who brought new regions under the ethnographical spotlight. Next B. turns to Posidonius' excursus on the Jews, preserved (directly or indirectly) by Strabo (pp. 42–54). B. sees the original context as Posidonius' account of the siege of Jerusalem by Antiochus VII in 135–134 B.C. (p. 43). For B., Posidonius is an innovator, who sought to put evolving Jewish history in a framework, rather than simply cataloguing what made the Jews different (p. 52). Finally B. discusses the only surviving Jewish excursus in Latin (apart from Tacitus') by Pompeius Trogus, preserved by Justin in the second to third centuries A.D. (pp. 54–63). Kingship, a leitmotiv of the *Historiae Philippicae*, becomes a crucial theme in this excursus, which follows the scheme of *origo, mores, situs*, and (briefly) *historia*. B. characterizes Trogus as being better informed than other classical authors in his survey of Jewish history. In this chapter B. perhaps could

have given less prominence to the difficult question of how far Diodorus Siculus and Strabo preserve or change their sources, particularly since these two authors predate Tacitus. One important item missing from B.'s bibliography is K. Clarke, *Between Geography and History: Hellenistic Constructions of the Roman World* (Oxford, 1999).

Chapter 3, on Tacitus' Jewish excursus, is the strongest (pp. 65–142). B. begins by discussing the many hapax legomena, poeticisms, and archaisms in the ethnography of the Jews as an indication of Tacitus' careful techniques of composition. Thus, Tacitus underscores the special nature of Jewish customs, geography, and history by deploying striking linguistic forms and allusive Virgilian and Sallustian language. B.'s systematic discussion of the excursus generates some interesting observations: Titus' extraordinary affability (5.1.1) contrasts pointedly with his misanthropic opponents, the Jews (p. 83), the hopeless situation in which Moses and his followers find themselves in the desert (5.3.1) foreshadows the crisis of the Jews confronting Titus at 5.13, but where the former leads to the foundation of Jerusalem, the latter leads to its destruction (p. 90), and the description of the city's fortifications (5.11.3) and the temple (5.12.1–2) casts Jerusalem in utopian colours as a practically unassailable fortress (p. 108). B. suggests that the whole excursus is shot through with two contradictory but intertwined notions: one emphasizes the strength of the Jews as opponents of Rome, while the other foreshadows the almost inevitable fall of the city. Both these narrative strands reflect the fact that Tacitus' unusually long portrait of the Jews (which is uncharacteristically negative, in comparison with the *Annals*) is partly dictated by his desire to depict Vespasian and Titus in a positive light (pp. 137–42).

Such foiling between the Jews and the Flavians must indeed have contributed to Tacitus' conception of the excursus, but a more nuanced analysis is possible. B. concedes that Tacitus' depiction of Vespasian and Titus is not entirely positive (p. 140 note 260), but underplays the crucial transitional rôle played by the Jewish war in dragging the Roman state from civil to foreign warfare. In this context, the interplay between the Jewish war and the much more murky Batavian revolt, which Tacitus struggles to characterize along the spectrum of civil-foreign warfare (2.69.1, 4.22.1), is illuminating. The striking point about *Histories* 4–5 is not that Tacitus devoted so much space to the Jews, but that he treated the Batavian revolt (almost invisible in our other sources) so extensively. The more reassuring character of the Jewish war is offset by the shifting identities of Julius Ciuilis and his Batavians in the previous book. B. productively compares the *Germania*, the *Agricola*, and the Jewish excursus in Chapter 4, but could have productively set the Batavians alongside the Flavians as another crucial foil for the Jews within the *Histories*.

In Chapter 4, B. suggests that several central *topoi* (e.g. clothing, habitation, geographical determinism, weapons) are missing from ethnographies of the Jews in general and from Tacitus' excursus in particular, because the Jews, having undergone a diaspora, lived scattered around the empire and even in Rome, so they were relatively well known and varied in their habits, depending on where they lived (p. 152). Thus, Tacitus' Jewish excursus in the *Histories* differs in its conception from the ethnographical material in the *Germania* and the *Agricola*. Finally, in Chapter 5, B. analyses the controversial reception of Tacitus' Jewish excursus, from early Christian authors to the Nazi period. The fact that the excursus was so often read out of context increasingly enabled its misappropriation and prompted its marginalization as a piece of historiography.

This intriguing study will certainly reinvigorate and reintegrate discussion of

Tacitus' Jewish excursus in historiographical debates. B. addresses issues which should interest a broader audience than those specializing in Roman historiography.

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