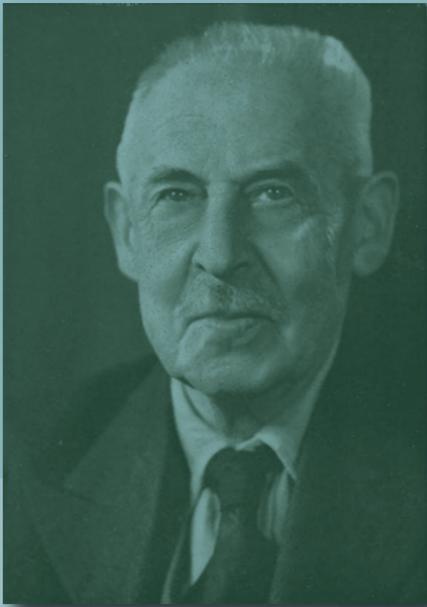


Erich S. Gruen

*Fragmentary Jewish Historians
and Biblical History*

Kieler Felix-Jacoby-Vorlesungen



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Kieler Felix-Jacoby-Vorlesungen

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Kieler Felix-Jacoby-Vorlesungen

Das Institut für Klassische Altertumskunde der Christian-Albrechts-Universität hat es unternommen, mit dieser Reihe an den großen Kieler Gelehrten Felix Jacoby zu erinnern. Damit kommt die CAU dem Wunsch ihrer Mitglieder nach, der großen Gelehrten dieser Universität zu gedenken, nicht zuletzt derer, die aus politischen Gründen unsere Alma Mater verlassen mussten.

Wie in den ersten drei Jahrzehnten des 20. Jahrhunderts Studierende und Wissenschaftler aus verschiedenen Ländern nach Kiel kamen, um von Jacobys Gelehrsamkeit zu profitieren oder mit ihm zusammenzuarbeiten, so soll die Vorlesungsreihe das Werk von Felix Jacoby in einem lebendigen Dialog halten, zumal er auch nach dem Kriege seine Verbundenheit mit der CAU – trotz der Erfahrungen, die er hier machen musste – bekräftigt hat. Sie soll andererseits Ausdruck des Umstandes sein, dass die akademische Welt Europas (und rund um den Globus) inzwischen wieder Züge jener *res publica lit(t)erarum* angenommen hat, die ‚aufgeklärten‘ Gelehrten immer ein besonderes Anliegen war.

Wir möchten allen Dank sagen, die das Andenken an Felix Jacoby wach gehalten haben und weiterhin wach halten, indem sie sein Lebenswerk fortsetzen – hier sei „Brill’s New Jacoby“ genannt –, seine Bedeutung als Wissenschaftler angemessen würdigen und/oder sogar unserer Aufforderung Folge leisten, an der Christiana Albertina zu Ehren Jacobys und zu unser aller Bildung zu sprechen – zu einem Thema überdies, das Jacobys Bedeutung auf den Feldern von antiker Historiographie, Epik und Poesie anerkennt.

Die Christian-Albrechts-Universität ehrt in Felix Jacoby einen großen Gelehrten, einen beeindruckenden akademischen Lehrer und einen außergewöhnlichen Menschen.

Im Namen der Herausgeber

Hilmar Klinkott

Josef Wiesehöfer

Fragmentary Jewish Historians and Biblical History

Erich S. Gruen

The Jews are commonly, and quite properly, referred to as “the people of the book.” It is a proud boast and a defining characteristic. For Jewish historians of the Hellenistic period who sought to write the story of their people, however, this would seem to impose a severe limitation. The story, after all, had already been written. And not only that. It was embedded in sacred scrolls which, in principle at least, could not be tampered with. The greatest of Jewish historians in antiquity, Flavius Josephus, stated the matter quite forthrightly and unequivocally. At the outset of his twenty volume work on *Jewish Antiquities*, the narrative of his nation from biblical times to his own day, he affirmed that he will set forth the entire ancient history of his people and the constitution of the state translated from the Hebrew writings themselves.¹ He reiterates the commitment a few lines later, asserting quite explicitly that he

* I am very grateful to Prof. Josef Wiesehöfer for his generous invitation to deliver the fourth in the series of Felix Jacoby lectures at Kiel, for his great hospitality during my visit, and for his numerous kindnesses over the years. It is a distinct honor to pay tribute to the towering achievements of Felix Jacoby. This paper, of course, is but a small token of the gratitude that all ancient historians owe to Jacoby’s monumental labors. And it takes its stimulus from his greatest and most enduring work: *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*.

¹ Jos. *Ant.* 1.5: μέλλει γὰρ περιέξειν ἅπασαν τὴν παρ’ ἡμῖν ἀρχαιολογίαν καὶ τὴν διάταξιν τοῦ πολιτεύματος ἐκ τῶν Ἑβραϊκῶν μεθρημηνευμένην γραμμάτων. On the rendering of μεθρημηνευμένην as “translated,” see the lengthy note by Feldman (2000), 3–4.

promised neither to add nor to omit anything.² Later in his text, Josephus underscores the point that he has inserted nothing for the sake of embellishment that was not already there in Moses' own composition.³ The historian in his last work, the *Contra Apionem*, still insists that he, like all faithful Jews, approach their writings in such a way that no one would be so bold as to add, remove, or change a thing; every Jew from the day of his birth inherently considers them as the decrees of God.⁴ This theme derives its force from the injunction that the Lord imposed upon the children of Israel, according to the Book of Deuteronomy, before they entered the promised land. He instructed them to obey his commands unstintingly, to add nothing to them, and to subtract nothing.⁵

All this seems quite consistent and categorical. Yet, as is well known, Josephus himself evidently did not adhere to his own precepts. Very far from it. Not only did he depart considerably from a mere reproduction of the biblical text, offering in general a paraphrase rather than a literal translation of the Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint. He also omitted numerous portions of the received text, dropping a number of somewhat embarrassing stories, such as that of Jacob's deception of Isaac in Genesis or the construction of the Golden Calf in Exodus; he inserted several episodes not found in the Bible, like Moses' wedding to an Ethiopian princess; and he often reduced the role of God and of miracles in the biblical narrative, perhaps to put greater stress on human agency.⁶ How does one reconcile the claim of absolute adherence to the scriptures with the fact of considerable discrepancy between the

² Jos. *Ant.* 1.17: ἐπηγγειλάμην οὐδὲν προσθεῖς οὐδ' αὐ παραλιπῶν. See also 10.218; cf. 2.347, 9.208, 14.1, 20.261; *CAp.* 1.42.

³ Jos. *Ant.* 4.196.

⁴ Jos. *CAp.* 1.42: οὔτε προσθεῖναι τις οὐδὲν οὔτε ἀφελεῖν αὐτῶν οὔτε μεταθεῖναι τετόλμηκεν, πᾶσι δὲ σύμφυτόν ἐστιν εὐθὺς ἐκ τῆς πρώτης γενέσεως Ἰουδαίους τὸ νομίζειν αὐτὰ θεοῦ δόγματα.

⁵ Deut. 4:2, 12:32.

⁶ See the examples collected by Feldman (1998), 37–39; *idem* (2000), 7.

biblical text and the historian's reconstruction? What does this tell us about the attitude toward historiography, its aims and its constraints, among Hellenistic Jewish writers?

Discomfort with this discordance has generated numerous efforts to get around the problem. Perhaps Josephus, at least in his own mind, did not alter the text but applied new readings to it that left the meaning intact. Or by stressing the authorship of Moses Josephus could dodge any infringement of God's word by claiming the right to modify the words of a human being. Or, on another theory, the historian hoped to get away with his sweeping statements, since readers, in the absence of bound manuscripts, indexes, or research assistants, let alone search engines, would simply be unable or unwilling to challenge his claims on exactitude. Or, on yet another hypothesis, the assertion that nothing was added or omitted referred not to the entire Bible but only to the commandments and the laws of the Torah issued to the people, to Halakhah rather than Haggadah, thus leaving the historian free to remold or reshape the rest of the biblical material. A further suggestion proposes that Josephus drew a distinction between the content or import of the text and the actual forms and expressions that conveyed the significance. The latter could be manipulated while the former remained intact. Yet a different analysis sees the phraseology of Josephus as signaling that he has accurately transmitted the testimony of his sources, not that he has reproduced the biblical account without alteration. Or, as a favored solution has it, Josephus simply conveys a conventional cliché for a historian to assert his reliability, a practice followed by Greek and Near Eastern writers alike, without pretense that this equates to literal transmission.⁷

⁷ A valuable summary of opinions, with their principal proponents, may be found in Feldman (1998), 39–44; *idem* (2000), 78; see also Sterling (1992), 252–256; Barclay (2007), 31; Inowlocki (2005), 50–51.

None of these efforts to skirt the issue seems compelling. Josephus' language about adding or subtracting nothing is pointed and firm. It does not readily allow for interpretations of loose phraseology, analogizing, or commonplace rhetoric. Josephus, after all, reiterated this position several times, and could hardly have taken it lightly.⁸ The straightforward expressions simply cannot be made to harmonize with the numerous changes, expansions, or reductions in the text that Josephus perpetrates. It seems evident that the historian (and his readers) understood this notion of exactitude rather differently from our normal usage. Yes, the sacred scriptures were inviolable. But those who reproduced them in other languages or other genres were not thereby precluded from altering, adapting, or departing from the original whose sacrosanctity was, in their view, uncompromised by alternative versions. Such versions neither substituted for nor supplanted their model. The latter remained untouched and intact. This was no deception on Josephus' part, and no tortured attempt to disguise exegesis as faithful rendering.

On the contrary. Readers of Josephus who were familiar with the Hebrew Bible would not have been misled by his pronouncements. Biblical authors, after all, had long since produced alternative versions. One needs think only of the Book of Deuteronomy which revised substantially the Book of the Covenant in Exodus or the two books of Chronicles which offered their own retelling of material to be found in the books of Samuel-Kings.⁹ This was

⁸ Inowlocki (2005), 51–65, usefully cites parallel texts in other authors, indicating that ἀκριβεία can be understood in a flexible sense, pertaining to significance and meaning rather than exact rendering. But she goes too far in claiming that Josephus' references to “neither adding nor omitting anything” were not of great importance and that he saw himself at the outset as an interpreter rather than a translator.

⁹ On the revision by Deuteronomy, see Deut. 12–26; cf. Exod. 20:22–23:33. Among innumerable discussions, see Fishbane (1985), especially 231–277. On the Chronicler, see Fishbane (1985), 380–403.

already an old story. And none would regard it as challenging the authority of the scriptures.

The whole practice has given rise to a description denoting a presumed genre: that of the “rewritten Bible.”¹⁰ But the very concept creates problems of its own. Was there such a genre at all? The fact that moderns have struggled, largely in vain, to find a definition or even a label that encompasses the range of texts that might come under the rubric attests to the difficulty of the endeavor, and should question its usefulness. Each of those who have made a stab at it has produced a somewhat different list of items that might fall within the boundaries of the description. What has been gained by that? It is worth reminding ourselves that the category, whether one calls it “rewritten Bible,” “rewritten Scriptures,” or “rewritten scriptural texts,” is a strictly modern concoction. The ancients possessed no such classification. Nor is there any reason to believe that they grouped texts of the range and variety represented by the diverse adaptations of scriptural material under a single heading—let alone that they considered themselves as contributing to a particular genre with a distinctive tag. For the sake of convenience, we can continue to use the conventional phrase “rewritten Bible,” always within quotation marks—but without any suggestion that it designates a definable category.

¹⁰ The term was evidently coined by Vermes (1961), 95. Numerous efforts have been made to define a genre or to identify the texts that would fit into that concocted category. It goes without saying that no such pigeon-hole ever receives mention in antiquity. Among attempts to provide a frame and to assemble works that can be set within it, see, in general, the survey of Nickelsburg (1984), 89–156; further, Harrington (1986), 239–247; Alexander (1988), 99–121; Halpern-Amaru (1994), 4–5; Najman (2003), 7–8; Crawford (2008), 2–15; Kugel (2012), 3–23. Bernstein (2005), 169–196, ostensibly questions the value of the category but struggles at length to define criteria, more narrow than loose, that would include some texts and exclude others. This seems to be a singularly fruitless endeavor. See also Zahn (2012), 271–288, with additional bibliography. She does reckon rewritten Bibles as a genre, but with a flexible and nuanced understanding.