

POPULAR HISTORY

Jerusalem's Traitor: Josephus, Masada, and the Fall of Judea, by Desmond Seward. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009. xvi + 275 pages. Notes to p. 291.

Select Bibliography to p. 300. Index to p. 314. \$28.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Keith W. Whitelam

Desmond Seward, who normally specializes in popular historical works on medieval and early modern European history, has set out to provide an account of the life and work of Josephus, the first century C.E. Jewish historian, for general rather than academic readers. This departure was inspired by his father's experiences as a British Royal Air Force pilot in Palestine during World War I, which instilled in him a love of William Whiston's translation of Josephus's *The Jewish War* (London, 1736) and "a respect for the fighting qualities of the Jews in both ancient and modern times" (p. xi).

Seward regards *The Jewish War* as an adventure story with the immediacy of a first-person historical novel, comparing it to Robert Graves's *I, Claudius*, and has tried to reflect this in what he hopes is "a straightforward narrative account of the man for ordinary readers" (p. xvi). He traces Josephus's checkered career—from rebel commander to his capture and subsequent collaboration with the Romans during the war against Roman occupation (66–70 C.E.) leading to the capture and destruction of Jerusalem and the fall of Masada—by reworking Josephus's account in *The Jewish War*, supplemented by material from his other works, *The Jewish Antiquities*, *Against Apion*, and *The Life of Flavius Josephus*. Seward succeeds in his aim of producing a readable account for the general public, though at times it lacks the excitement of the historical novel he hopes to emulate, particularly as the narrative is interspersed with long quotations from Josephus's works.

However, the readability is achieved at a price. Seward often introduces a note of caution when reading Josephus, particularly when he is justifying his own actions or denigrating the role of the Zealots, who violently opposed Roman occupation. But all too often, he seems willing to accept Josephus's version of events because there is nothing else to put in its place, claiming that "when writing about the war, he usually, if not invariably, seems to be telling

the truth" (p. xvi). Given the novelistic style of the book, there is little discussion of key issues: the nature of Josephus's sources, his role as a propagandist, or his reliability for reconstructing the events of this period. The reader is made aware of some of these problems but ultimately must rely on Seward's judgment and his assessment of more detailed scholarship.

The general reader needs, therefore, to proceed with caution. In order to translate Josephus's world for his contemporary readers, Seward has the disturbing tendency of explaining technical terms in a way that is often misleading and inaccurate. He describes the High Priest as "a species of Jewish pope or caliph" (p. 7) and the Sanhedrin as "a species of senate" (p. 11). Similarly, the Essenes are termed "Jewish monks," with Qumran as their "monastery" (p. 13). It is as though Judaism and Jewish religious groups and categories can only be understood in Christian terms when they are by no means directly equivalent. More importantly, Seward's defense of Josephus's position as a patriot trying to save his people from a futile struggle, and ultimately catastrophe, or his dismissal as fanatics of those groups, such as the Zealots, who were determined to resist occupation, can all too easily be read into the contemporary struggle in Palestine today. The narrative opens and closes with the symbol of Masada: the preface is entitled "Masada Shall Not Fall Again," while Seward concludes that the sacrifice of those who committed suicide at Masada rather than surrender to the Romans restored Josephus's pride in his nation, inspiring him to write two later works on Jewish religion and civilization and a defense of Judaism. The importance of Masada in Seward's narrative structure needs to be read alongside his stated admiration for the "fighting qualities of the Jews" mentioned above. There is no critical examination of Josephus's account of events, including his rendering of long speeches at which he was not present. Important studies of the role of the myth of Masada in cultural memory, ideology, and national identity, such as Yael Zerubavel's *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1995) or Nachman Ben-Yehuda's *Sacrificing Truth: Archaeology and the Myth of Masada* (Humanity Books, 2002), are crucial for assessing Josephus's account

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and its contemporary uses. Seward's skill in bringing important historical topics to a wider audience needs to be tempered by the knowledge that there are many pitfalls facing the unwary reader.