

Introduction to Literary Powerplays – Jewish Authors and Power in the Graeco–Roman Period

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This special thematic section of *Judaica: Neue digitale Folge* brings together five articles first presented as papers at an online workshop at the University of Bern in June 2021. The workshop “Jewish authors and power in the Graeco–Roman period” was dedicated to the complex relationships, both experienced and imagined, between ancient Jewish authors and power systems and structures throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods. It did so by exploring these and related themes while relying on diverse sources and questions, such as the analysis of texts from the Hebrew Bible and questions regarding calendar reforms during the rule of Seleucid kings. Implementing the ideas of post-colonial studies on power and power relations, the papers focused on the different fields where power structures and relations played a role in antiquity and put forward an understanding of power not only as physical dominance in various forms, but also as soft powers that emerge from sociocultural structures.

Questions regarding power and power relations have been a prominent topic in the study of the Greco–Roman period, and especially when it comes to the complicated and eventful history of Judaism during that time. Whether relating to the use of power by ruling empires or the resistance to it by local populations, scholarship has often focused on forms of ‘physical’ power like state violence and the extortion of revenue from subjugated populations. The adoption of post-colonial perspectives by scholars of antiquity and Jewish Studies changed this trend and brought with it new studies on forms of ‘soft’ power and the ways in which subaltern groups employed it. While undoubtedly a welcome development, some contemporary studies are too quick to apply contemporary concepts and circumstances to the ancient world. Yet, as for example John Barclay has demonstrated skillfully with his works on Flavius Josephus’ *Contra Apionem*, the use of post-colonial theories in Ancient (Jewish) Studies can be most fruitful and lead to new insights. With this workshop, we turned our look to the ancient evidence and to the ways in which (mainly) Jewish authors describe and establish notions of power. In the Greco–Roman period, and throughout the Mediterranean and the Near East, different communities encountered new and changing forms of dominance and had to respond to them by rethinking old concepts and formulating new ones. We asked: How do the

“subaltern” authors define power, or do they define it at all? How is power described, established and negotiated in (and between) texts? How do these authors perceive power, how does it affect their writings and forms their texts implicitly or explicitly? How is power tangible in character depictions, virtues, moral and social standards? Do the authors pursue an inside, for example Rome centered, view or rather an outside one? Are there any limitations to power or alternative sources to it? Can we detect notions of power balance or attempts to create such a balance, literary or even with an attempt to change politics?

The contributions to this special thematic section engage with these questions in diverse way and from a variety of approaches and befitting the different textual corpora they build on.

Jeremy Steinberg¹ connects power and trauma in examining Josephus’s account of the triumphal procession that celebrated the capture of Jerusalem. While in such a depiction the reader would expect a display of emotions, Steinberg cogently argues that Josephus made concessions to Flavian in his account by removing himself, as the author, from it, but, at the same time expressing some of the trauma the event commemorated evolved.

In his article, Carson Bay² explores the potential of exemplarity as means of exerting power. Focusing on the figures of Abraham and Moses, that harken back to the distant Jewish past, Bay shows how they were used within a Greco-Roman Mediterranean setting as vehicles of discursive power that spanned across Jewish and Christian communities. This in turn highlights the interconnectivity between exemplarity and (racial) alterity.

Helge Bezold³ looks into depictions of physical power and violence wielded by Jews in the Hebrew and Greek version of the book of Esther. Through careful comparison of the textual witnesses he shows how the role of Jewish-led violence was discussed and negotiated within the community and how greater attention to portrayal of the use of power can help us situate fictive accounts in their historical context.

Fabian Knopf⁴ presents an analysis of the way the Seleucid dynasty made use of time and chronology through introducing the Seleucid Era. He investigates why the authors of 1 Maccabees held on to the Seleucid Era even though his writing clearly directed against Seleucid rule and other options of dating were available to him. Further Knopf discusses the new dating during the rule of Simon, acknowledged by Demetrios II., concluding that Simon has to be seen as one of the most important Seleucid deputies in Judaea.

Matthias Adrian⁵ in his contribution identifies a similar use of discursive power that relies on Mediterranean cultural patterns, in this case to a discourse meant to empower

¹ <https://doi.org/10.36950/jndf.2024.1.14>.

² <https://doi.org/10.36950/jndf.2024.1.15>.

³ <https://doi.org/10.36950/jndf.2024.1.16>.

⁴ <https://doi.org/10.36950/jndf.2024.1.17>.

⁵ <https://doi.org/10.36950/jndf.2024.1.18>.

male agents on the expense of female ones. Adrian exposes how early Christian communities intentionally employed common terminology related to civic benefactions in order to curb the authority of female community members, while maintaining their material support, and subordinate them to male leadership.

Unfortunately, workshop participants Katell Berthelot, Ursula Westwood, Laura Quick, and Ellena Lyell were not able to share their contributions for this edition of *Judaica*, but some are published elsewhere and we are grateful for their participation and contribution to the discussion, as well as to all those who attended the online workshop.

The articles collected here and the workshop from which they originated did not assume to be exhaustive of a topic so wide as ancient Jewish authors relationship to power. However, with this special thematic section we hope to have raised some questions and to have shed light on some themes that merit further investigation and formulation in future inquiries.

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