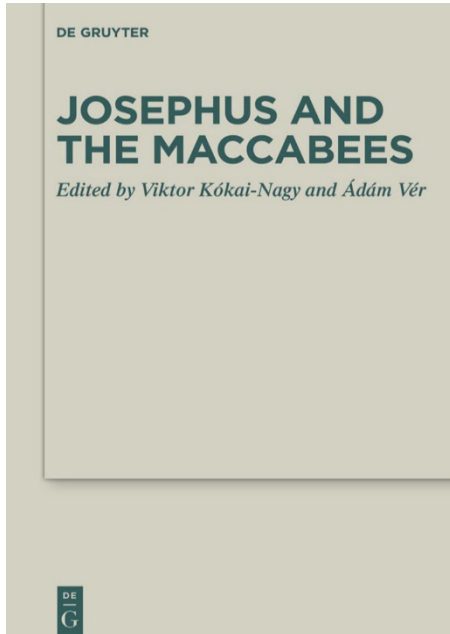


*Ákos József DEBRECZENI*<sup>1</sup>:

**Kókai-Nagy, Viktor – Vér, Ádám (eds.), *Josephus and the Maccabees*, Berlin–Boston, Walter de Gruyter, 2025, pp. 238, ISBN 978-3-11-914918-1, ISSN 1865-1666**



We cannot form a complete picture of the biblical stories without knowledge of Josephus and the Maccabees. Although the books of the Maccabees have been omitted from the Protestant biblical canon, anyone who is curious about what happened between the Old Testament and the New Testament must read Josephus's writings and study the stories of the Maccabees. The editors are Dr Viktor Kókai-Nagy, Assistant Professor of the DRTU Department of Biblical Theology and the History of Religion and USJ Department of Biblical Studies and Dr Ádám Vér, Assistant Professor at ELTE Institute of Ancient and Classical Studies.

The collection of studies holds the presentations given at the Josephus and the Maccabees conference held in Komárno Slovakia in 2024, apart from Steve Mason's introductory study written

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upon special request. The volume thus boasts ten studies, some of which are in German as well as English. The authors of the volume are well-known researchers, notably Steve Mason, who is an authority on Josephus. The focus of the conference was to look at Josephus and the Maccabees from a new perspective, an intention that is well reflected in the studies and titles included in the volume. The authors have done an excellent job of showing how Josephus, the Book of Maccabees, as well as historical developments mutually influence one another. The topics are unusual and, in some places, provocative. Thanks to the theme of the conference, the authors, and the editors, all studies included are easy to understand, logically structured, nicely delineated, and sometimes complementary. The result is a collection of studies in which the individual works are monolithic, making the topic easy to understand.

At the beginning of the collection, we find two papers by Steve Mason. The first one of them (*The Hasmoneans in Modern Scholarship*) is a historical overview that was not presented at the conference, but the editors thought it would serve as a good introductory essay. This study summarizes how the Maccabees became heroes of the Zionist movement. Mason highlights that this process was an integral part of the nationalist movements between 1850 and 1950, a period that saw the birth of Zionism and the idea of a new Jewish state. As a result, the Maccabees came to be regarded as national heroes and freedom fighters who defended their homeland and established statehood. Mason's second study (*Josephus on the Hasmoneans and Their Ancient Legacy*) is more closely related to the theme of the conference, in which Mason rethinks Josephus's self-understanding in relation to his origins and the Roman power. Josephus did not view Roman power as oppressive; on the contrary, he saw his people's prosperity under their rule. He was looking to separate the Maccabean past from the Jewish–Roman war. Josephus considered the Maccabees to be national heroes who fought justly and lawfully, but he did not consider further uprisings to be legitimate. He accepted Roman rule, which he believed to be divine. According to Mason, Josephus saw the glorious Hasmonean freedom fighter past together with Roman rule.

Tal Ilan (*The Popularity of the Hasmoneans after the Fall of Their State: Some Onomastic Observations and a New Inscription*) uses archaeological evidence to prove that the Hasmonean heroes remained popular in later centuries. He uses onomastic analysis to prove that the names of the Maccabean rebels (John, Simon, Judas, Eleazar, Jonathan) were used with preference. These names accounted for 32 percent of the names appearing in the inscriptions he examined. According to Ilan, parents consciously chose these names even centuries after the fall of the Hasmonean dynasty. Ilan also mentions an inscription from Jerusalem in which the name of Hyrcanus appears as a point of reference. Ilan's study illustrates that inscriptions, mosaics, and artefacts accurately reflect the mindset of everyday people. The memory of the Hasmonean dynasty did not cease to exist among the common people but had an impact that lasted for centuries.

Martin Meiser (*Die Charakteristik des Antiochus IV. Epiphanes im Zweiten Makkabäerbuch und bei Josephus*) examines the figure of Antiochus IV Epiphanes as represented in Josephus and in the account in 2 Maccabees. His study focuses on the negative attributes ascribed to Antiochus in both sources. Meiser first presents the description of Antiochus in 2 Maccabees, which portrays Antiochus as an unambiguously negative character. The negative epithets condemn the ruler primarily in a religious sense. Above all, he is an unholy, impure, and blasphemous ruler. His main characteristics are arrogance and fighting against God. In contrast, Josephus portrays him in a more restrained manner. Meiser points out that Josephus sought to make parallels between his own contemporaries and Antiochus. The rebels and tyrants of Josephus's time brought similar destruction to the people as the Seleucid ruler. In addition, Josephus considers him greedy and unrestrained. In Josephus, Antiochus is a fallen ruler driven by his unrestrained nature, while the Second Book of Maccabees demonizes the ruler from a religious point of view.

Viktor Kókai-Nagy (*Mattathias bei Josephus und 1Makk*) makes a comparison, examining Mattathias in the reflection of Josephus and 1 Maccabees. In his study, he points out that 1 Maccabees compares Mattathias to biblical figures, while Josephus describes his noble origins. The author draws attention to the fact that Josephus consciously transforms the character of Mattathias. He finds equivalents for Hebrew expressions borrowed from Greek philosophy. Mattathias is no longer a zealous religious warrior who behaves in a “barbaric” manner but a thoughtful, virtuous, philosophical ruler. Viktor Kókai-Nagy points out parallels that reshaped Mattathias's character so that the Hellenistic–Roman world would recognize his deeds.

In his study *Hanukkah Propaganda: Purification and Dedication of the Temple in Maccabees and Josephus*, József Zsengellér compares the occasion of the Hanukkah festival – namely the purification and rededication of the temple – in the books of the Maccabees and the writings of Josephus. According to József Zsengellér, the First Book of Maccabees legitimizes the Hasmonean dynasty, while the Second Book of Maccabees promotes the new holiday among Egyptian Jews. However, Josephus succinctly summarizes the events in his work *The Jewish War*, while in one of his other works, *The History of the Jews*, he gives a theological slant to the events and links them to Daniel's prophecy. Zsengellér points out that Josephus reframes the events – for example, he does not write about the miracle of the cruse of oil. Judas Maccabeus appears as a hero, a hero of freedom. Hanukkah is an unexpected event that brought sudden freedom to the Jews. According to the author, Josephus is hinting that this might happen again in the future.

David Cielontko (*The Death of Eleazar Avaran in 1 Maccabees and Josephus' Jewish War*) compares the martyrdom of Mattathias's son, Eleazar Avaran, with the descriptions in 1 Maccabees and Josephus's work. First, he presents the description in 1 Maccabees, according to which Eleazar was self-sacrificing, saved his people, and thus earned himself “eternal fame”. Cielontko points out that the author of 1 Maccabees wanted to legitimize the dynasty, while Josephus describes the events in a more sceptical and ironic manner. According to Josephus, Eleazar handled his own

downfall, which was caused by his overzealousness and pursuit of fame, which Josephus calls a futile sacrifice. Josephus presents this death as a bad omen, in contrast to the assessment in 1 Maccabees. According to Cielontko, Josephus used this harsh portrayal to criticize his own contemporaries, arguing that the rebellion and later death were not martyrdom but senseless suicide.

István Karasszon (*Martyrertheologie: 2Makk und Josephus*) compared the martyr theology appearing in 2 Maccabees and the writings of Josephus. The book of 2 Maccabees views martyrs as moral victors. Respect for the Torah and belief in resurrection appear as central elements. Josephus refrained from such an assessment and did not divide history into good and bad. His goal was to inspire respect for the deaths of these people in the Roman world. That is why he compared them to the Spartans, who died an honourable death. According to Karasszon, Josephus interpreted the Maccabean martyr theology into Greco–Roman language, or as he put it, “Josephus fuhr auf dem Weg der Geschichtsschreibung in einem römischen Wagen – aber mit jüdischem Benzin.”<sup>2</sup>

Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr (*Begründungen der Tora bei Jakobus, Josephus und im 4. Makkabäerbuch*) examines three sources in an attempt to show how the authors tried to interpret the message of the Torah into Greek–Roman language. The Epistle of James, Josephus, and 4 Maccabees addressed the diaspora. According to Niebuhr, the Epistle of James sees the Torah as a unity of faith and action, pointing to God as the sole judge. This provides the basis for everyday ethical life. For Josephus, the Torah is the ideal constitution, the greatest educational instrument among Jewish laws. The Torah can create moral consensus in the community. 4 Maccabees frames the Torah as a philosophical and educational system – with the help of the law, man can rule himself. The martyrs are role models who received a perfect education and thus remained faithful to what they had learned. Niebuhr points out that all three documents consider the Torah to be the standard for everyday life and formulate concepts that make the Torah valuable to the Greco–Roman world as well.

František Ábel (*Josephus' Concept of Proairesis tou biou (C. Ap 2.210) in the Context of the First Century CE Social Identity Issues: Perception of Maccabean Movement Tradition*) examines a specific Josephus expression (*Proairesis tou biou*), which defines Jewish existence as a conscious decision or way of life. Josephus's goal is to make the Jewish way of life attractive to non-Jews. He points out that the laudatory descriptions of the Maccabees serve the legitimacy of the Jewish people. The author considers it important to emphasize that in ancient times, ethnic and religious boundaries were more flexible than they are today. According to Josephus, preserving Jewish identity does not mean isolation but rather an ethical community. Josephus offers Jewish philosophy, the Torah, as an accessible alternative to the Greco–Roman world.

I recommend this collection of studies to theologians, historians, and anyone interested in Josephus and the Maccabean era. From these studies, we can learn how important it is to support harmony between self-identity and dialogue within our own communities.

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<sup>2</sup> P. 200.