Response to Steve Mason, “‘At Play Seriously’: Irony and Humour in the Vita of Josephus”

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When Steve Mason sent me his paper in late September he wrote “They are saying here that Sept. 11 brought the death of irony (in public discourse), amongst other things.” This brought to mind what has frequently been said with reference to the Shoah, the Nazi Holocaust. In particular I was reminded of a passage in a letter by Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jewish woman. On August 24, 1943, she wrote to her friends after having watched the departure of a train of deportees. This was a few weeks before she herself was deported to Auschwitz where she was to be killed:

There was a moment when I felt in all seriousness that after this night, it would be a sin ever to laugh again. But then I reminded myself that some of those who had gone away had been laughing, even if only a handful of them this time … There will be some who will laugh now and then in Poland, too, though not many from this transport, I think.¹

Yet, irony thrives as a coping mechanism especially in borderline situations. For irony to be possible, it seems to me a certain detachment, even aloofness, is required. Jewish jokes were used as creative responses to the most difficult situations, even in the concentration camps, yet for an ironic presentation of the Holocaust to be possible and broadly though not universally acceptable one had to wait for Benigni’s movie “La vita è bella” (“Life is beautiful”).

Precisely that distancing was impossible for anyone, in the U.S. or elsewhere, in the immediate aftermath of September 11. Yet, time passes quickly. As a matter of fact, there are many signs that as soon as a little distance is gained, irony is used also to cope with the events of September 11.²

If then we speak of irony in Josephus today, we are dealing with a very serious matter, even though it might be helpful not to take ourselves too seriously. As a matter of fact, Mason speaks of “cosmic irony” (27), as a form of situational irony – when perhaps comic irony might have been sufficient.

Evidently, irony is an in-topic at the SBL. On the same day, at least three papers are being discussed that deal explicitly with irony: “The Son of Man and Jesus’ Irony” in the Synoptic Gospels Section (S18-23), “Shalom and the Cleansing of Jerusalem: The Function of Irony in Ezra 9-10” in the Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemia Section (S18-55), in addition to Mason’s paper. Perhaps there are additional papers in the AAR Program!

Steve Mason has undertaken a major task in trying to show how and where irony may be at work in Josephus’ writings in general, and in the Vita in particular. Noting that no convincing explanation of the setting and purpose of the Vita has been given, he looks at Greco-Roman rhetoric

² I have heard that American and United are the best airlines because they carry people … right to the office. I also heard that the hijackers must have been of a certain (non-Arab) nationality because they had orders to get in touch with the tower, … but stupidly misunderstood. I have also been sent an internet animated postcard showing the new World Trade Center towers, bending over to avoid oncoming planes. It is difficult
and more specifically at the use of irony in late Republican and early Imperial Roman literature. Following Rudich and Bartsch he traces “a seismic shift toward irony to the reign of Nero” (18). He then looks through an ironic lens at Josephus’ work in general and the *Vita* in particular. As we have come to expect from him, Mason’s study is insightful, incisive, and provocative. He provides ample and up-to-date bibliography that covers many aspects of Josephus and of the classical tradition.  

Here my task, as I understand it, is to respond above all by raising questions, to be discussed further by the participants in the seminar. One first point is linguistic. Mason notes that “[Josephus] employs εἰρων – words seventeen times in all, … a ratio that makes him a conspicuously heavy user” (19). In the *Complete Concordance* I find even a few more occurrences, 20 in all, of εἰρων, εἰρωνεία, and the verb εἰρωνεύομαι and its compounds. While I agree that Josephus uses this terminology with unusual and unexpected frequency, I consider it more important to deal with the question how this word group is related to the undefined and apparently undefinable concept of irony.

Mason’s rendering that Hyrcanus II’s advisers claimed that Herod’s father Antipater and his family were no longer “speaking of themselves ironically as a mere secretariat to the king” (p. 20 quoting *War* 1.209), appears problematic. My tentative translation would be “for they no longer give themselves the appearance of mere administrators, [but act clearly as overlords (masters, despots), displacing him (Hyrcanus II)].” To my mind, there is a considerable difference between “to give oneself the appearance of” and “to speak of oneself ironically.” The irony of this situation may be sought elsewhere, for a few paragraphs earlier Antipater had claimed that if the people followed the revolutionaries, they would experience him as a despot instead of a protector (κηδεμόω) and Hyrcanus as a tyrant instead of a king (*War* 1.202). Thus his detractors inadvertently repeat and fulfill his warning.

Mason continues – apparently more in order to highlight the occurrence of “εἰρων - words” than to fix their meaning – to speak of irony in various passages of the *War*. “Herod’s son Archelaus likewise is accused of irony in using empty words to present his claim to rule” (20, emphasis added. Reference is to *War* 2.26). But was Archelaus really accused of irony or was he rather accused of a game of deception? Is every game of deception ironic? Archelaus was further accused by Antipater of having pretended (κατειρωνεύομαι) to mourn for his father during the day, while enjoying drunken revelries at night (*War* 2.29). Under what conditions is faked mourning for one’s father ironic? If the deceiver hopes that his or her deception will not be detected by anyone, an essential element of irony (“ironic intention”? [16]) seems to be missing. Does Josephus, in reporting these accusations, add ironic intention? The “εἰρων – words” are generally applied by Josephus to the protagonists, whereas the irony – if there is any – can be detected only by the historian and/or the reader.

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4 εἰρων (1x), εἰρωνεία (5x), εἰρωνεύομαι (4x), εξειρωνεύομαι (2x), επειρωνεύομαι (2x), κατειρωνεύομαι (6x).

5 Shortly before (*War* 1.199), Antipater receives the honor of πάσης ἐπίτροπος Ιουδαίας, certainly not...
If I read him correctly, Mason asserts that since the audience has prior knowledge of the outcome, “every rebel ploy, every misguided motive and deceitful speech in Josephus’s *War*, has an ironic quality” (23). I think that such statements can be accepted as true only if specific indicators of ironic intention can be identified.

Among all the “εἰρωνεύω – words” used by Josephus, the dictionary by Liddell-Scott-Jones includes the term “irony” only under the lemmata ΕΠΙΕΙΡΩΝΕΥΟΜΑΙ (“speak ironically”) and ΚΟΤΕΙΡΩΝΕΥΟΜΑΙ (“use irony towards”). Perhaps this relative scarcity may be taken as a symptom of moderate to severe irony deficiency in the lexicographers, but it might also suggest that we have to be careful in distinguishing between the word and “the thing.” Of this distinction, Mason is quite aware in his discussion of the development and ancient definitions of the concept of the εἰρωνεύω (9-15). He also speaks of Varus as a past master of what many Greek writers called ξιρωνεύεια – simple dissimulation” (34). On the one hand, he is certainly correct in stressing the difficulty of defining irony (9), but on the other hand – ironically – it seems dangerous to discuss irony without having a working definition.

A second point arises out of the question of language: How much is the use of irony concentrated in any one linguistic or cultural setting? Mason rightly rejects Thomson’s view that irony “was not native to the Roman mind” (18). It may be ironic to criticize what is missing in a 72-page paper. Yet, I would like to point out that when Mason speaks of his “brief survey of irony language in antiquity” (15) and “the wider phenomenon of irony in ancient literature” (15) he seems to intend Greek or at most Roman literature. As this year’s SBL Meeting Program reminds us, irony is being detected almost everywhere in the Biblical world.

Here I come to a basic question regarding Josephus: while his intimate connection to the literary and cultural traditions of Rome is increasingly being emphasized, are we correct in trying to understand him (almost) *entirely and exclusively* in that setting? Much of his use of irony of course does fit perfectly into a setting in Flavian Rome, as Mason admirably shows. Yet, did Josephus have to come to Rome in 71 to learn about irony, or deception? Or did he learn it while undergoing brainwashing and special training for Roman “undercover activities” before the outbreak of the war, in line with an imaginary scenario developed by Gohei Hata? Mason is basically correct – but too modest with regard to himself – in noting that “we interpreters of Josephus have overlooked the ‘rhetorized mentality’ of his time and place, which seems crucial for understanding the Vita’s rhetorical preoccupations and its cavalier disregard for historical detail” (4). Josephus’ time and place of writing is clearly Rome, but can we safely disregard the times and places about which he writes, where he got his first education and spent most of the first thirty years of his life? If it is important to understand “Flavius Josephus in Flavian Rome,” is it not equally important to try to

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10 Mason certainly has no intention of disregarding this aspect. He emphasizes it, among other places, in his “Introduction to the *Life of Josephus*” under the heading “Historical and Literary Contexts” in his *Flavius*
probe into his existence “between Rome and Jerusalem”? This last point clearly goes beyond the question of irony in Josephus, but I would hope that in our discussion this problem will be taken up in some way.

One more brief point before I turn to the *Vita*, the focal point of this paper. The story of Judas the Essene (*War* 1.78-80; *Ant.* 13.311-313) certainly contains elements of irony. Mason cites Iocaste as a parallel. However, there are many other and closer (mostly Greek?) parallels, the most famous one being that of Cambyses who has his brother Smerdis killed, because in a dream he has seen a Smerdis rise to the throne. Cambyses later dies at Ecbatana. But the Smerdis who rises to the throne is not his brother but a namesake, and the Ecbatana where Cambyses finds his death is not his capital city, but an unknown locality by the same name (Herodotus, *Hist.* III.30; 61-66). Many other examples may be found: Archidamus, Epaminondas, Hannibal, Hesiod, Lysander, Seleucus I, and Pompey the Great. In each case, death waits in an unfamiliar place by a well-known and therefore misunderstood name.\(^{11}\) Fontenrose calls this the “Jerusalem Chamber motif,” based on a famous scene in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*, in which the king recognizes that he is to die in a chamber called Jerusalem and not in the city by that name.\(^{12}\)

Now concerning Josephus’ procedure in his *Vita*, Mason provocatively states “Somewhat surprisingly, to generations of sincere scholars, Josephus illustrates his sterling character as Galilean commander through the use of irony as his principal administrative tactic” (31).

Mason has done his homework, in his exemplary commentary on the *Vita* and in related studies. He points out how disproportionately frequently Josephus uses the language of deception in the *Vita*. He notes “5 of 13 occurrences of ςκιπτωμα; 2 of 6 occurrences of σοψιμα; and 5 of 20 occurrences of στρατηγια are in this little book” (33). I would add explicitly, as Mason implies, that the subject of these pretenses (ςκιπτωμα does not mean “to fabricate”), tricks, and stratagems is never anyone else but Josephus in person. I might further add that the term στρατηγια, which recurs 5 out of 32 times in the *Vita*, is here used exclusively of Josephus, both in the sense of “trick,” “stratagem” (*Vita* 174, 389) and of “leadership,” “command” (*Vita* 205, 251, 260).\(^{13}\) Thus Mason is entirely correct in noting Josephus as a self-proclaimed master of deception. My question, though, is whether bragging about one’s successful deceptive tactics constitutes irony.

According to Mason, Josephus “begins … to establish the ironic context for the work” at *Vita* 17, after his return from Rome.\(^{14}\) Looking again at the beginning of the *Vita*, with eyes

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\(^{11}\) Appian, *Roman History* XI (10) 63: Seleucus (I) had been told by an oracle: “If you keep away from Argos you will reach your allotted year, but if you approach that place you will die before your time.” He consequently avoided every place known to him by that name but was slain near an altar locally known as Argos.

Plutarch, *Lysander* 29: Lysander had received an oracle to be on guard against a sounding Hoplites, was slain near a brook by that name.

Plutarch, *Titus Flaminius* 20: “There was an ancient oracle . . . ‘Libyssan earth shall cover the form of Hannibal’ . . . Hannibal thought this referred to Libya and a burial at Carthage . . . but there is a sandy tract in Bithynia on the sea shore, and on its border a large village called Libyssa.” Near this village Hannibal was living in exile. He took poison to avoid capture by Titus Flaminius.

Cassius Dio 42.5.6: “following a certain oracle, he (Pompey the Great) had been suspicious of all the citizens named Cassius, but instead of being an object of a plot by any man called Cassius he died and was buried beside the mountain that had this name.”


sharpened by Mason’s acute observations, I would like to ask, seriously, if irony is not present in some way also in the earliest part of the *Vita*, concerning Josephus’ pedigree and education. It may not be insignificant that he opens his work with a litotes (ἐμοὶ δὲ γένος ἑστιν ὁυκ ἀσημον), yet I would suggest above all to explore the ironic possibilities of the Bannus episode (*Vita* 11-12), beginning with the punning effect associated with the man’s name, noted by Mason. After describing Bannus’s unusual lifestyle, Josephus states without further ado that he became his “devotee” (ζηλωτής). Then, instead of letting us know what it meant to be a devotee, he goes on in the next sentence to tell us that, having satisfied his [youthful?] longing, he left him for the quite different attractions of city life – and for some form of (renewed) relation with the Pharisees. Mason implies in his translation and states in his commentary (19 n. 84) that Josephus adopted the practices of Bannus. In the text, however, these practices are ascribed to Bannus alone. The incongruity of becoming a devotee and immediately dissociating oneself seems to me a fairly strong signal of ironic intent, especially when combined with other possible signals. Mason explains: “Josephus has crafted, or possibly even invented, this piece to support his claim to virtue.” But is it not conceivable instead that Josephus was speaking tongue in cheek about his youthful exploits? This is not to say that Mason’s basic intuition is incorrect, namely that the principal purpose of the *Vita* is the portrayal of Josephus’s character and virtue.

The question is, however, what instruments we can use to distinguish his irony signals from what might appear ironic to us now? If Mason sees irony in the description of the eve of the revolt (*Vita* 17-19) but not here, whereas I see it here and not there, is there a way to decide which side Josephus would be on?

After working through Mason’s paper several times, and reading again through the *Vita*, I have come to agree with him about much – though evidently not all – of the irony he sees. I would tend to agree concerning the roles of Alityrus and Poppaea (60-65). Sarcastic irony is certainly a weapon used effectively against Justus (43-44, 53-58) In particular, ironic elements in the story of the delegation are very evident (44-53). Mason has done all “sincere scholars” (31) a great service in systematically uncovering these ironies and I think that this paper should have a profound effect on future studies of the *Vita* and indeed of Josephus.

In this paper, Mason is obviously primarily concerned with literary not historical matters. But he nonetheless reaches an important historical conclusion: “On the historical level, the standard hypothesis that Josephus wrote the *Vita* under compulsion from Justus’s challenge means that its apparent concessions become footholds for historical reconstruction. If the foregoing interpretation of the *Vita* is basically correct, however, upon realizing their thoroughly rhetorical and deliberate character we lose any historical traction in such passages” (68). While he emphasizes only the negative side of the coin, I would ask whether the discovery of irony also has positive effects for historical research. Here I would like to mention just one example, brought by Mason himself, again only in negative form. He states concerning the burning of the Herodian palace in Tiberias: “On this reading, the passage provides no support for the historical argument that the Jerusalem council was

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16 Mason in his commentary (19 n. 81) denies any connection with Josephus’ archenemies, the Zealots. Yet, while Josephus occasionally does use the term ζηλωτής in a positive sense (e.g. Ag.Ap. 1.162; Ant. 12.271), it carries negative connotations not only in frequent references to the Zealot party and other fanatics in the *War*, but also in the closest passage in *Ant.* 20.47 where “a devotee of foreign practices” is feared ineligible for kingship.
17 *Life of Josephus*, 18 n. 80.
aggressively prosecuting the revolt at this time” (35). I would venture to conclude that this particular passage, together with other pieces of evidence, seems to suggest that the Jerusalem council was not aggressively prosecuting the revolt at this time. However, in general, this paper may serve as an alert that one has to be quite sophisticated in drawing historical conclusions from statements in Josephus.

In this excellent piece, Steve Mason is doing a sort of Socratic service, increasing our awareness of our ignorance, and thereby advancing our knowledge considerably. We need to be very grateful to him for this.

p. 25 Should it be Gnaeus instead of Gaius Sentius Saturninus?