

The apocryphal book of the Old Testament, II Maccabees, is a rather unique survival of a complete Hellenistic historiographical work and a very interesting text on many levels (Text: John R. Bartlett, *The First and Second Books of the Maccabees*, 1973). It is also, as its preface explains, an epitome of the lost five-book history of Jason of Cyrene and is thus one of the earliest surviving epitomes. This paper examines the work as an epitome, starting from its fascinating, methodologically-informed preface.

This preface makes various statements about the advantages of the epitome over the original history and contrasts the roles of the original historian, investigating everything, and the epitomator, aiming for concise expression at the expense of detailed enquiry. Since ancient 'histories' are regularly based closely on earlier material anyway, this comparison raises questions about this distinction: what might be the advantage in designating a work an 'epitome' rather than writing a 'history'?

The epitome of Jason of Cyrene indeed shows signs of having altered the form, structure and scope of the original work in order to make the epitome present the epitomator's own message, assisted by authorial interventions in the body of the epitome and perhaps also the addition of extra material (See Robert Doran *Temple Propaganda: the Purpose and Character of 2 Maccabees*, 1981, and further bibliography therein). This treatment of the original conflicts with the usual view of an epitome as a faithful summary of the original, but in fact fits with the approach actually taken by other literary-level epitomes in both Greek and Latin. What makes an epitome is not just the process of abbreviating earlier material, but also the way it is presented to draw attention to that process and what it has been used to achieve.

The synonymous terms for epitome used in the preface to the epitome of Jason of Cyrene, particular *metaphrase*, provide further avenues to explore what an epitome might be aiming to do and to begin to see epitomes in the wider context of abbreviation in the ancient world. The epitomator's overt concern with the style of his work, especially in the work's closing authorial comment, also makes interesting suggestions about the aims and status of epitomes, which it is useful to explore in the context of other epitomes of ancient historical works.

Does the approach and definition of an epitome put forward by this Hellenistic epitome of Jason of Cyrene work for later epitomes, both epitomes of historical works and epitomes of other material? And, can it also be reconciled with the awkward earliest surviving works to identify themselves as epitomes, Epicurus's *Letter to Herodotus* and *Letter to Pythocles*?