

2. Introduction

2.1 The Life of Flavius Josephus

Flavius Josephus, born *Yosef ben Matityahu* (Hebrew: יוסף בן מתתיהו), needs no introduction. He is among the best-known individuals of the ancient world. Born in the first year of the reign of the Emperor Gaius Caligula (37/38 CE), he is the foremost historian of first-century Judaea, the chronicler of the *Jewish War* and the entire *Second Temple Period*. His writings are a primary resource both for the current circumstances of his homeland during his lifetime and for its past. Frequently noted, Flavius Josephus “is certainly the single most important source for the history of the Jewish people during the first century C.E.”¹ His twenty-volume *opus magnum*, the *Jewish Antiquities* (*Antiquitates Judaicae*), is an historical account stretching from creation to his own day. It encompasses a panoramic narrative of the entirety of the Jewish experience, the first half in large part based on a paraphrase of the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. The *Jewish War* (*Bellum judaicum*), a recounting of recent events based on his own eyewitness testimony and contemporary documentation, chronicles in seven books the insurrection against Rome (66–73 CE), which ended with the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. His *Life* (*Vita*), originally an appendix to the *Antiquitates Judaicae*, is one of the few extant autobiographies from Graeco-Roman antiquity, in fact, “the earliest autobiographical work that has survived intact from ancient times.”² For clearly apologetic and polemical purposes it focuses narrowly on the brief period of time during the rebellion when he was the military commander in Galilee. His final work, the two-volume *Against Apion* (*Contra Apionem*), is an account of Jewish customs in response to antisemitic smears and slanders. It defends “the antiquity of the Jews and the virtues of their literary and political culture and, with a dazzling display of learning, refuting the many vicious calumnies lodged against them.”³ Together his writings comprise a corpus which has been in the public domain and a subject of continual study since their appearance at the end of the first century, extensively read and excerpted and copied in their entirety. A century ago, the Englishman H. St. John Thackeray, the leading Josephus scholar of his day, could claim that “There was a time in my own country when almost every house possessed two books, a Bible and a Josephus.”⁴

1 Harold W. Attridge, “Josephus and His Works,” in Michael E. Stone, ed., *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud, Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus*, *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* 2/2 (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 185–232, at 185.

2 Pnina Stern, “*Life of Josephus: The Autobiography of Flavius Josephus*,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period*, 41:1 (2010), 63–93,” at 63.

3 Jonathan J. Price, “Josephus,” in Andrew Feldherr and Grant Hardy, eds., *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 1: Beginnings to AD 600* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1: 219–43, at 223.

4 H. St. John Thackeray, *Josephus: The Man and the Historian* (New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1929; reprint Ktav Pub. House, 1967), 3.

“It is from Josephus’ own pen that we derive the majority of our information;”⁵ and as has been regularly recognized, “Josephus provided more information about himself than any other ancient historian.”⁶ Both in the *Bellum judaicum* and the later *Vita*, Josephus claimed distinguished parentage for himself. His mother, never mentioned by name, was descended from the Hasmonean dynasty, kings and high-priests of Judaea in the second century BCE; and like his forebears, his father was a temple priest of special distinction, a priest of the 24th line of sacrificers (*Vita* 2–5; *BJ* 1.3).⁷ With perhaps some embellishment, he reports that he was a brilliant student, if not a prodigy, who was already consulted on matters of scripture by his elders while still a youngster, enjoying a reputation for an excellent memory and sound understanding (*Vita* 8).⁸ During his adolescence he pursued studies with each of the major Jewish sects, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes, and even spent three years in the wilderness with the hermit Bannus, otherwise unknown, ultimately committing himself at the age of 19 in 55–56 CE to the approach of the Pharisees, “a sect having points of resemblance to that which the Greeks call the Stoic school” (*Vita* 12).⁹

On the eve of civil war in 63–64, Josephus joined an embassy on its way to Rome in order to secure the release of priests previously imprisoned and dispatched to the capital by Felix, the Roman procurator of Judaea (52–60). There befriended by the Jewish actor Aliturus and the Empress Poppaea, Nero’s wife (*Vita* 16), he made acquaintance with the Roman elite. For such an astute student, his time in the capital must have served as an introduction to Roman customs and the Latin language. Thackeray believed “this visit to the capital ... impressed him, at any rate, with a sense of Rome’s invincibility.”¹⁰ When war with Rome ensued shortly thereafter in 66, Josephus was entrusted with a military command defending the Galilee. This ended with his capture at the siege of Jotapata in the summer of 67, his resourceful escape from a suicide pact, whether in his words “should one say by fortune or by the providence of God?” (*BJ* 3.391),¹¹ and next his fateful decision to predict that Vespasian, then commander-in-chief of the Roman army, would someday succeed to the imperial throne (*BJ* 3.401).¹² When this occurred,

5 William den Hollander, *Josephus, the Emperors, and the City of Rome: From Hostage to Historian* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 7.

6 Anthony Grafton and William Sherman, “In the Margins of Josephus: Two Ways of Reading,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 23:3 (2016), 213–38, at 222.

7 Josephus, *Works*, 1: 2–5; and 2: 2–3: Ἰώσηπος Ματθίου παῖς, [γίνεται Ἐβραῖος,] ἐξ Ἱεροσολύμων ἱερέως. Cf. Oliver Gussmann, *Das Priesterverständnis des Flavius Josephus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 202: “Josephus’ Mutter, deren Namen nicht erwähnt wird, stammte möglicherweise aus hasmonäischem Hause (V 2).”

8 Josephus, *Works*, 1: 4–5.

9 Josephus, *Works*, 1: 6–7.

10 Josephus, *Works*, 1: viii.

11 Josephus, *Works*, 2: 686–7: εἴτε ὑπὸ τύχης χορὴ λέγειν, εἴτε ὑπὸ θεοῦ προνοίας. Cf. Louis H. Feldman, “Flavius Josephus Revisited: the Man, His Writings, and His Significance,” in Hildegard Temporini and G. G. W. Haase, eds., *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, 21.2 (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1984), 763–862, at 785: “it is hard to avoid the suspicion that Josephus cunningly arranged the lots (as indeed the Slavonic version of War 3.391 specifically declares) so as to be one of the last two of his men who survived the suicide pact.”

12 Josephus, *Works*, 2: 688–9: “You will be Caesar, Vespasian, you will be emperor, you and your son here” (σὺ Καῖσαρ, Οὐεσπασιανέ, καὶ αὐτοκράτωρ, σὺ καὶ παῖς ὁ σὸς οὗτος); and Feldman, “Flavius Josephus Revisited,” 786: “The fact that Josephus’ prophecy [of Vespasian’s accession to the throne] is found

Josephus was released from captivity (*BJ* 4.622–9; *Vita* 415; and *CA* 1.48) and assumed an active role as an interpreter and an intermediary between the Roman forces and the Jewish revolutionaries. Titus' victory secured Josephus passage back to the capital and a position at the Flavian court where he was well treated and spent the final decades of his life writing. Whereas Josephus recounts at considerable length his youth and his time during the Judean war, some thirty years (37/8–71), by comparison he is far more reticent about his stay in Rome of approximately the same duration (71–c. 100). He says little about this period of time, more than half of his adulthood; and as noted, “Of his thirty or more years in Rome there is little to record.”¹³ In fact, “of his activity at Rome, one knows only his literary production, which lasted some twenty-five years.”¹⁴ It may, indeed, be significant that the patron of his later works was not a member of the imperial family, but a certain Epaphroditus, possibly Marcus Mettius Epaphroditus, a Greek grammarian and *litterateur* active in the last third of the first century (*AJ* 1.8–9; *Vita* 430; and *CA* 1.1, 2.1 and 296).¹⁵ The date Josephus died is unrecorded. It must postdate the death of King Agrippa II whose passing he notes, but that exact year too is uncertain. It seems likely that it occurred sometime around the turn of the second century.

Josephus' career is known almost exclusively from his own testimony. Rarely (if at all) do external sources confirm his accounts, and much of what he says has been challenged. Certainly there is much to question, but it is unlikely that the narrative of major events is untrue. Josephus acknowledged that historical writings would be judged by his fellows and was no doubt aware that “enemies would have been quick to detect any doctoring of the facts.”¹⁶ As he admitted at the end of the *Antiquities*, he wrote “while there are still persons living who can either disprove or corroborate my statements” (*AJ* 20.266).¹⁷ Similarly, in the *Vita* he asserts that he wrote the *Bellum judaicum* in Rome immediately following the fall of Jerusalem, unlike his rival Justus of Tiberias who postponed publishing his account of the war twenty years until after the principal eyewitnesses capable of challenging its accuracy had disappeared.¹⁸ For Josephus, Justus had not dared to publish “until now, when those persons are no longer with us and you think that you cannot be confuted” (*Vita* 360).¹⁹ Josephus understood that his literary audience was capable of judging the veracity of his writings, and outright falsehoods and total fabrications would be recognizable. Too many contemporaries in high places

in the ‘War’, which was presented to Vespasian and Titus for approval, vouches for its historicity, as ... has [been] stressed.”

- 13 Thackeray, *Josephus: The Man and the Historian*, 15; and den Hollander, *Josephus, the Emperors, and the City of Rome*, 7.
- 14 Flavius Josephus, *Les Antiquités Juives*, volume I: livres I à III, ed. Étienne Nodet, 2nd ed. (Paris: *Les Éditions du Cerf*, 1992), vii: “De son activité à Rome, on ne connaît que sa production littéraire, qui dura quelque vingt-cinq ans.”
- 15 Josephus, *Works*, 4: 4–7; 1: 158–9; 1: 162–3; 1: 292–3; and 1: 410–11.
- 16 Feldman, “Flavius Josephus Revisited,” 785.
- 17 Josephus, *Works*, 9: 528–9: ἕως ἔχω ζῶντας ἢ τοὺς ἐλέγξοντας ἢ τοὺς μαρτυροῦσοντας.
- 18 See Tessa Rajak, “Justus of Tiberias,” *The Classical Quarterly*, 23:2 (1973), 345–68; and Tessa Rajak, “Josephus and Justus of Tiberias,” in Tessa Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome: Studies in Cultural and Social Interaction*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* 48 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 177–93, at 186: The “reader is protected by one consideration: that outright invention on the writer’s part would have earned the scorn of surviving witnesses of the original event.”
- 19 Josephus, *Works*, 1: 132–3: νῦν δ’ ὅτ’ ἐκείνοι μὲν οὐκέτ’ εἰσὶν μεθ’ ἡμῶν, ἐλεγχθῆναι δ’ οὐ νομίζεις, τεθάρρηκας.

remained to contradict his accounts if they were wholly fictitious. For this reason, he could not have altered his description of events beyond recognition, and so – without evidence to the contrary – it seems reasonable to accept that his testimony has a factual basis. Not to dismiss exaggeration, or embellishment or self-justification, as might be expected, or just carelessness, slips of memory and a dependence on flawed sources, there must be a substratum of truth underpinning the commentary of Flavius Josephus. It is difficult to understand how a vantage point in the late 19th or 20th century or thereafter offers a better view of the episodes which took place during the *Jewish War* and its aftermath than that of a contemporary, who, if not present at the actual happenings, was, to be sure, in Judaea and at Rome during the time of their occurrence.

In addition to being an eyewitness and sometime participant in the events of his times, Josephus also had at his disposal documents written by others. In both the *Vita* and the *Contra Apionem*, he mentions access to the campaign commentaries of the Roman generals Vespasian and Titus, which no longer exist (*Vita* 342 and 358; and *CA* 1.56).²⁰ He knew the *Universal History* and a possible *Life of Herod* by Nicolaus of Damascus, an administrative official for Herod the Great and his son Herod Archelaus. These writings, now lost except for fragments, were a probable source of information. Josephus explicitly credits Nicolaus of Damascus for knowledge of the privileges accorded the Jews of Asia by Marcus Agrippa (*AJ* 12.127).²¹ He received correspondence from King Agrippa II, the last member of the Herodian dynasty, in Josephus's words, "letters testifying to the truth of the record" (*Vita* 364; cf. *CA* 1.51).²² These communications must have been a valuable resource; but, except for the two excerpts quoted (*Vita* 365–6), none of the sixty-two letters mentioned survive.

For the earlier sections of the *Antiquitates Judaicae*, Josephus had as his main resource the Old Testament, either in one of the current Greek translations or in the original Hebrew or both. Exactly which is a matter of dispute. His wording seems to follow the Lucianic recension, one of a number of Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible.²³ In addition, he had a collection of holy books which he received from Titus after the fall of Jerusalem. For den Hollander, Étienne Nodet "on the basis of a detailed comparison [with] existing Biblical manuscripts ... presents the possibility that the ultimate source of the *Antiquities* was in fact this set of volumes, which may have been taken from the temple library."²⁴ In books three, four and five of the *Antiquities*, which paraphrase the Octateuch, Josephus refers to what appears to be extra-biblical material from the temple in Jerusalem. He remarks that "A writing deposited in the temple attests that God foretold to Moses that water would thus spring forth from the rock" (*AJ* 3.38;

20 Josephus, *Works*, 1: 124–7; 1: 132–3; and 1: 184–5.

21 Josephus, *Works*, 7: 62–5. For Nicolaus of Damascus' mention elsewhere, Josephus, *Works*, 7: 482–3 (*AJ* 14.68); and Josephus, *Works*, 7: 452–3 (*AJ* 14.9). Cf. Mark Toher, "Nicolaus and Herod in the *Antiquitates Judaicae*," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 101 (2003), 427–47; and Tyler Smith, "Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* in Competition with Nicolaus of Damascus's *Universal History*," *Journal of Ancient Judaism*, 13 (2022), 52–76.

22 Josephus, *Works*, 1: 134–5: ἐπιστολάς τῆ τῆς ἀληθείας παραδόσει μαρτυρῶν. Cf. Josephus, *Works*, 1: 182–3.

23 Attridge, "Josephus and His Works," 211, and note 44.

24 den Hollander, *Josephus, the Emperors, and the City of Rome*, 173.

cf. Num. 21.16).²⁵ For Thackeray, “these refer not to the Scriptures generally but to a separate collection of chants made for the use of the temple singers, and that the allusion here is to the little song to the well in Numb. xxi. 16 ff., with the introductory promise ‘Gather the people together and I will give them water’.”²⁶ Elsewhere Josephus mentions the *Song of Moses* “in a book preserved in the temple” (*AJ* 4.303).²⁷ In a third instance he notes that Joshua’s staying of the sun “is attested by Scriptures that are laid up in the temple” (*AJ* 5.61; cf. Josh. 10.13).²⁸ On these three separate occasions Josephus acknowledged sacred texts from the temple in Jerusalem which supplied him with information for the earlier books of the *Antiquities*.

In his attempts to document the longevity of the Jewish people in the *Contra Apionem*, Josephus also quoted numerous ancient historians. It is often the case where his citations constitute some of the earliest remaining references to their works. Moreover, there are borrowings from various writers sprinkled throughout the *Antiquities* and the *War*. Underlying the Josephan corpus is a broad array of sources, both his own personal testimony and those of others.

2.2 The Afterlife of Flavius Josephus

Despite the appearance of betrayal to his fellow Judaeans and his allegiance to Rome, Flavius Josephus remained a Jew throughout his lifetime: “For never may I [Josephus] live to become so abject a captive as to abjure my race or to forget the traditions of my forefathers” (*BJ* 6.107).²⁹ His writings, especially his final work, the *Contra Apionem*, confirm his adherence to the faith of his ancestors. Nevertheless, his books were for the greater part of the first millennium ignored by his co-religionists and instead embraced by Christians. Early Fathers of the Church found useful information in his works regarding ancient Judaea, the birthplace of Christianity, along with references to figures from the Gospels, including John the Baptist (*AJ* 18.116–9), James the Just, the brother of Jesus (*AJ* 20.200), and Jesus Christ himself in the controversial and much-debated *Testimonium Flavianum* (*AJ* 18.63–4). Although the authenticity of each of these three passages has been challenged, there seems to be a growing consensus that the *Testimonium Flavianum*, while possibly subject to later editing, is – along with the other two – in part authentic and not a complete fabrication: “A widely held view nowadays is that Christian alterations may have been fairly minimal ... The language generally is Josephan and there are some features that would seem unlikely to have come from a Christian scribe.”³⁰ The three references are found in the surviving Greek man-

25 Josephus, *Works*, 4: 336–7, and note a: δηλοῖ δὲ ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ ἀνακειμένη γραφὴ τὸν θεὸν προοιπεῖν Μωυσεῖ οὕτως ἐκ τῆς πέτρας ἀναδοθήσεσθαι ὕδωρ.

26 Josephus, *Works*, 4: 336–7, note a. Cf. Thackeray, *Josephus: The Man and the Historian*, 90.

27 Josephus, *Works*, 4: 620–3: ἦν καὶ καταλέλοιπεν ἐν βιβλῷ ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ.

28 Josephus, *Works*, 5: 28–9: δηλοῦται διὰ τῶν ἀνακειμένων ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ γραμμάτων.

29 Josephus, *Works*, 4: 406–7: μὴ γὰρ ἔγωγέ ποτε γενοίμην ζῶν οὕτως αἰχμάλωτος, ἵνα παύσωμαι τοῦ γένους ἢ τῶν πατρίων ἐπιλάθωμαι.

30 Helen K. Bond, “Josephus and the New Testament,” in Honora Howell Chapman and Zuleika Rodgers, eds., *A Companion to Josephus* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 147–158, at 154; and Alice Whealey, “The *Testimonium Flavianum*,” in Honora Howell Chapman and Zuleika Rodgers, eds., *A Companion to Josephus* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 345–55. Recently arguing