VI JOSEPHAN AFTERLIVES

Receptions in antiquity

If the literary texts which survive from the Roman era are anything to go by, Josephus seems to have been little known among non-Jewish and non-Christian authors in antiquity. There is no clear indication that his younger contemporary Tacitus knew his works. The latter's account of the Jewish Revolt is somewhat confused. For instance, it mixes up the names of Simon bar Gioras and John of Gischala, an error which is unlikely to have been made by someone who had carefully read the *Jewish War*.[1] Similarly, his account of the exodus draws not from the *Antiquities* or the *Against Apion*, but appears to have been informed by precisely the kind of Judeophobic Greek scholarship which Josephus set out to refute in the latter work.[2] Either Tacitus had not read Josephus' discussions of Moses and the exodus, or he was unpersuaded by them. The same seems true of Josephus' other great prose contemporary, Pliny the Elder. Josephus does not feature in the massive bibliography which comprises the opening of the *Natural History* and, although Pliny mentions two subjects of importance to Josephus, Masada and the Essenes, there is no indication that the *Jewish War* was the source of his information.[3] In terms of later 'pagan' classical authors, the record is similarly exiguous. Both Suetonius and Dio mention Josephus, but not as a source or an author: they refer to him as a noble Jewish prisoner who prophesied Vespasian's accession.[4] The philosopher Porphyry mentions the Essenes and cites Josephus as his source, but other than this the Josephan corpus leaves no trace in the later non-Christian classical tradition.[5]

Josephus' Jewish reception is similarly elusive. We find nothing which need indicate detailed direct engagement when we turn our attention to Late Antique Jewish texts in Hebrew and Aramaic, above

[1] Tac. *Hist.* 5.12.
[2] Tac. *Hist.* 5.3–4.
[3] Plin. *HN* 5.73.
[4] Suet. *Vesp.* 5.6–7; Cass. Dio 65.1.4.
[5] Porph. *Abst.* 4.11–13.

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all the vast compendia of rabbinic debates and rulings which began to be compiled around the year 200 as the Mishnah and the Tosefta, and were later expanded in both Palestine and Babylonia as the Talmud, the collections which form much of the basis of modern rabbinic Judaism. Passages of rabbinic literature, especially passages in the Babylonian Talmud which date from the fourth century or later, occasionally include material which closely parallels traditions found in Josephus. For instance, in the *Antiquities* we find the tale of a banquet hosted by the Hasmonaean monarch John Hyrcanus, at which a Pharisee named Eleazar dares to suggest that John should give up the high priesthood on the grounds that his paternity was questionable because his mother had been a prisoner of war. This leads to John switching his allegiance to the Sadducee school and persecuting the Pharisees (*AJ* 13.288–300). The story is repeated in rather similar terms in the Babylonian Talmud but there are striking differences, too: here, the names and sectarian affiliations of the characters are different and the whole thing takes place in the reign not of John Hyrcanus but of his son Alexander Jannaeus.[6] Similarly, the story of Herod's terrible deathbed resolution to massacre the popular leaders of Judaea, mentioned in Chapter 1 above (*BJ* 1.659–69; *AJ* 17.174–9, 193), is retold in the rabbinic corpora, but applied to Alexander Jannaeus instead.[7] We even find mention of an eminent Jewish man who 'defects' from the rebel side to the Roman and wins imperial approval by prophesying Vespasian's accession, although in rabbinic sources the figure involved is not Josephus but Yohanan ben Zakkai, the creator of the first rabbinic 'academy' at Yavneh and the founding father of rabbinic Judaism.[8]

However, there is nothing in any of these parallels which suggests direct knowledge or use of Josephus' texts (although proving intertextuality between different languages is always difficult). The most likely explanation for the parallels is the existence of a 'pool' of (probably oral) legendary material which was common to both Josephus and the editors of the Babylonian Talmud. This would explain the multiple differences of detail, as well as the broad similarity of content.[9] In the case of the Yohanan story, it may be that some version of the Josephus story circulated in the region before later

[6] b.Qidd.66a. On this story, see Kalmin 2016: 297–9.
[7] Branch P. scholion on Megillat Ta'anit, Shevat 1–3. On this parallel, see Tropper 2024.
[8] b.Git.56a–b. On Yohanan, see Tropper 2005.
[9] On these parallels, see Cohen 1986; Kalmin 2016; Noam 2017.

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coming to be attached to a more popular figure from the period. So, for all these common elements, there is nothing in the rabbinic compilations which suggests that the rabbis were reading Josephus.

The Josephan corpus, then, had a distinctly underwhelming impact in both 'pagan' and Jewish circles. However, one community of Late Antique readers simply could not get enough of his works. Early Christian authors eagerly consumed Josephus' books, and eagerly advertised their great enthusiasm for them and their author. The doctors of the Early Church describe our author as 'almost a second Livy', 'the Greek Livy', 'the most noted of the Jews', 'worthy of credit because of his truthfulness', and 'highly esteemed'.[10] But what lies behind this pervasive early Christian enthusiasm for all things Josephan? Sabrina Inowlocki has identified three principal ways in which Christian authors of Late Antiquity made use of Josephus' texts.[11] First, they provided both arguments and models for Christian apologetic treatises against pagan critiques of the faith (the *Against Apion* was especially important here). Second, they provided support, confirmation, and guidance for biblical exegesis: the *Jewish Antiquities* offered expanded interpretations of many Old Testament narratives, and both the *Antiquities* and the *War* gave additional information on many of the persons mentioned in the Gospels and Acts. Third, and most important of all, the *Jewish War* would prove to be instrumental in constructing and supporting an evolving Christian understanding of the significance of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

The destruction of the Temple was important to Christians because it seemed to say something significant about the relationship between God and the Jews and, by extension, between God and the Christians. The understanding developed that the destruction of Jerusalem symbolized God's final abandonment of the 'Old Covenant': specifically, that, as a result of their rejection of Christ and their perceived responsibility for his execution, the Jews had forfeited God's favour, and God had conferred that favour instead on the Christians. This notion, known as Christian supersessionism, is fundamentally anti-Jewish: it conceptualizes Judaism as a dead religion,

[10] Cassiod. *Inst.* 50.17.1; Jer. *Ep.* 22.35; Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 3.9.2; Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 3.9.3; Jer. *De vir. ill.* 13.

[11] Inowlocki 2016. For a full list of references to Josephus in early Christian literature, see Schreckenberg 1972: 68–105. For cursory discussion of a wide range of early Christian authors on Josephus, see Hardwick 1989.

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and presents the Jews as characterized by blindness and permanently stained with the sin of deicide. The value of Josephus to people invested in this ideology is that he, as a Jewish author, agreed with it in one crucial respect, that the destruction of Jerusalem had been a divinely orchestrated punishment of the Jewish people. Of course, Josephus' vision is radically different because of two major divergences from the Christian interpretation: to him, God's punishment was temporary, not permanent, and the 'sin' being punished was the transgressions of the rebels, not the crucifixion.[12] But, despite these vital differences, that core commonality was enough for Josephus' work to be pressed into service as a validation of anti-Jewish Christian theologies.[13]

Eusebius' account of 70, for instance, in the third book of his *Ecclesiastical History*, takes many details from the *Jewish War*, offering a lingering description of the suffering of the Jews within the walls which closely paraphrases (as he admits) content from the fifth and sixth books of Josephus' history (*Hist. eccl.* 3.5–3.10). But at the beginning of the account, Eusebius explicitly presents all these sufferings of the Jews as punishments for the crucifixion and for their supposed persecution of the apostles (3.5.6), and he concludes it with a restatement of his very un-Josephan claim of causation (3.7.8):

> I do not need to add anything about the disaster that overwhelmed the whole nation after the suffering of the Saviour and after the words spoken by the mob of Jews when they sought the pardon of a bandit and a murderer but begged that the Lord of Life should be taken from them, beyond the words of this historian.

To reinforce his point, he changes details from Josephus, a tendency which is especially noticeable when he ignores Josephus' clear statement that the Temple was destroyed on 10 Av and claims, instead, that the destruction happened on Passover, at the same time as the crucifixion forty years earlier (3.5.6). Thus, with dark irony, is Josephus, that redoubtable defender of the Jewish people, pressed into service to support their condemnation. It is hard to disagree with Martin Goodman's view that Josephus 'would have been astonished and horrified at the reinterpretation of his narrative as a divine judgment on his people for rejection of Christ'.[14]

[12] See above, pp. 45–7.

[13] On the importance of the coincidence of this aspect of Josephus' vision with the evolving Christian ideology, see Pollard 2015: 75–6.

[14] Goodman 2019: 26. For more on patristic receptions of Josephus, see Schreckenberg 1987; Mason 2003b: 7–24; Kletter 2016: 368–74.

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The fourth-century historiographical work *De excidio Hierosolymitano* ('On the Destruction of Jerusalem'), sometimes known as Pseudo-Hegesippus, is a very strong illustration of just how closely Josephus came to be implicated in this evolving Christian anti-Judaism. The text is a Latin adaptation of the *Jewish War*, although the extent to which the author rewrites, restructures, abbreviates, and rearranges his principal source means that it should be seen as an original work rather than as a 'translation'. For four books, Pseudo-Hegesippus follows the basic structure of Josephus' narrative; then, in Book 5, it radically compresses the last three books of the *War* into one enormous volume. The *War* is clearly not the only text which the author has been reading. Pseudo-Hegesippus was a fan of the Latin classics, creating many allusions to Tacitus, Virgil, Horace, and above all Sallust, but also incorporating material from Christian sources, such as the long digression on Simon Magus based on the *Acts of Peter*, and from the *Jewish Antiquities*.[15] Vital episodes from Josephus, including the prophecy to Vespasian and the Flavian triumph, are omitted. The narrative ends at the fall of Masada, which, as Carson Bay has noted, is figured as the end of Jewish history.[16] In noisy editorial interventions, the author is not afraid of inelegantly hammering his theological framework home (Pseudo-Hegesippus 5.2):

> And indeed what was it other than sacrilege, when they extended irreverent hands against the source of their salvation, when they stoned him, when they scourged him, when they seized him, when they killed him? Then truly the divine fire consumed their sacred things. For when they were burned by the Babylonians they were afterwards renewed, destroyed by Pompey they were restored again, but they were thoroughly burned when Jesus came, broken up by the heat of the divine spirit they vanished.[17]

Thus Pseudo-Hegesippus furnishes us with a classicizing and Christianizing Latin adaptation of the *Jewish War*, which strongly insists on 70 CE as a punishment for the crucifixion, which imagines the Jewish Revolt as the end of Judaism, and which even goes so far as to lambast Josephus for failing, in his 'perfidy', to understand the true reason for the momentous events he relates.[18]

[15] On the sources and models of Pseudo-Hegesippus, see Bay 2022: 336–74. On the text's pronounced Sallustianism, see Stover and Woudhuysen 2022. For Simon Magus, see Pseudo-Hegesippus 3.2; for the *Antiquities*, see the text's somewhat anti-Josephan adaptation of the *Testimonium Flavianum* at Pseudo-Hegesippus 2.12.

[16] Bay 2021.

[17] Trans. W. Blocker, at https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/hegesippus_05_book5.htm.

[18] See the Book 1 Prologue for explicit denunciation of Josephus' perfidy.

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Nor was Pseudo-Hegesippus the only Latin Josephus available. We also possess a much closer Latin rendition of the *Jewish War*, sometimes wrongly attributed to Rufinus, probably undatable but certainly in existence by the ninth century. Cassiodorus, the sixth-century scholar and statesman, records commissioning some 'friends' to translate the twenty-two books of the *Antiquities*. This translation survives (it is actually a translation of both the *Antiquities* and *Against Apion*).[19] Thus, by the end of Antiquity, all of Josephus' books except the *Life* existed in Christian Latin translations, the versions in which they would principally circulate in medieval western Europe.

From antiquity to modernity

In the Byzantine world, Josephus' original Greek texts would continue to be widely copied and influential.[20] Sometime between the ninth and fifteenth centuries, the Byzantine-transmitted Greek text of the *Jewish War* was translated and reworked into an important, if somewhat wayward, Slavonic version.[21] Similarly, Josephus (or the Hebrew *Yosippon*, which, as we will soon see, derives substantially from Josephus) was translated into Arabic versions, allowing the Josephan tradition to enter both Islamic and Jewish historiography in that language. The Islamic reception of Josephus needs more scholarly attention, but there is clearly a story there to tell. In the fourteenth century, the great Muslim historian Ibn Khaldūn recalled reading, in Egypt, a book on the history of the Jews from the Maccabees to 70 CE, written by one Yūsuf ibn Kuryūn, an eminent Jewish man who fought the Romans, was captured by Vespasian, and was present with Titus when Jerusalem fell.[22]

In the world of Western Christianity, Josephus' works primarily circulated in those Late Antique Latin versions, elevated by the praises of the Church Fathers and wedded to anti-Jewish theological notions, which their author would neither have recognized nor endorsed. Josephus seems to have been extremely popular in western Europe throughout the medieval period. More than 230 manuscripts of the

[19] On these Latin versions, see Levenson and Martin 2016.
[20] On Josephus in Byzantium, see Bowman 1987.
[21] On the Slavonic *Jewish War*, see Leeming 2016.
[22] Fischel 1961: 114–16.

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Latin Josephus survive, making him easily one of the most widely copied ancient authors in the medieval world.[23] His influence was strongly felt in the rarified atmospheres of monastic and scholastic communities, and his works were known and used by such luminaries as Bede, William of Malmesbury, and Isidore of Seville.[24] Just as significantly, we have ample testimony of more popular forms of reception too. Instrumental to these was the anonymous Latin prose work known as the *Vindicta salvatoris* ('The Avenging of the Saviour'), the earliest manuscripts of which date to Flanders in the ninth century, and which is also preserved in many later variants from across Europe.[25] The work demonstrates no direct familiarity with Josephus, but it certainly engages with the broader tradition of Josephan reception, featuring as it does a virulent strain of anti-Judaism and a clear interest in presenting 70 CE as God's punishment for the crucifixion. It is an altogether odd composition, riddled with geographical and historical errors, which presents Titus and Vespasian as 'sub-kings' under the emperor Tiberius who convert to Christianity and set out to destroy Jerusalem consciously as avengers of Jesus Christ. In the *Vindicta*, the Flavians become Christian proto-crusaders who deliberately plan to exterminate Judaism in revenge for the supposed deicide carried out by the Jewish people.

The *Vindicta* would be widely influential, spawning a whole series of anti-Jewish romances on the theme of 70, as well as a pan-European theatrical tradition of spectacular dramas depicting the fall of Jerusalem.[26] Later medieval texts based on the *Vindicta* which demonstrate some familiarity with Josephus also appeared, most famously the thirteenth-century French *chanson de geste La destruction de Jérusalem* and the fourteenth-century Middle English alliterative poem *The Siege of Jerusalem*. These works 'correct' some of the *Vindicta*'s errors and incorporate Josephan material: *The Siege of Jerusalem*, for instance, includes passages on the cannibalism of Maria (lines 1081–96) and on Vespasian's conduct of the Roman civil war of 69 CE (897–964) which must have ultimately originated in

[23] Levenson and Martin 2016: 322–3.
[24] Pollard 2015; Kletter 2016.
[25] Hall 2016: 41–2.
[26] On the theatrical tradition, see Wright 1989. For Josephan reception in later theatrical history, see Auger 2016.

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a Latin version of the *Jewish War*, combining the core narrative of the *Vindicta* with Josephan content.[27]

Receptions such as these would have had a much broader audience than just scholars and clerics, and fed into popular attitudes which had lamentable real-world consequences. In 1190, the Jews of York were besieged in York Castle by a Christian mob led by a crusading knight, and their appeals to the authorities brought no relief. The tragic result was the collective suicide of every person in the castle, and thus the destruction of the city's entire Jewish community. The contemporary Christian historian William of Newburgh wrote a famous account of these terrible events which was clearly modelled on Josephus' Masada narrative, with the rabbi Yom Tov, who died in the castle, given a speech which is reminiscent of Josephus' oration of Eleazar ben Yair. William concludes his account with the following observation:

> Such irrational madness turned by rational people against themselves is a thing to be wondered at. But anyone who has read the history of Josephus concerning the Jewish war will readily appreciate that this type of insane conduct, to which the Jews are prone whenever unfortunate events happen to befall them, has persisted into our times from their ancient superstition.[28]

Thus was Josephus called upon to explain the consequences of the virulent Christian anti-Judaism which his own works had been made to corroborate.[29]

In the tenth century, (probably) in Naples, Josephus finally re-entered Jewish literature, albeit indirectly. An anonymous Hebrew author created a remarkable work known as *Sefer Yosippon* ('the Book of Yosef'), which drew on the Latin versions of Josephus as its principal sources, but reworked them extensively and spliced in material from elsewhere, creating a text which is clearly heavily dependent on Josephus and yet equally clearly something original and new.[30] The work begins by updating the biblical Table of Nations (Genesis 10) to explain the origins of the peoples known to the author. Its second chapter is a remarkable melange of Virgil, Livy, and Jewish legends, describing the early history of Italy, including the tale of how Esau's

[27] On the *Siege of Jerusalem*, see B. Millar 2000; Pareles 2023: 4–5.
[28] William of Newburgh, *History of England*, 4.10.
[29] On William's Josephan narrative, see Nisse 2017: 22–3; Vincent 2013.
[30] Hebrew edition: Flusser 1978–80. English translation: Bowman 2023. For an overview, see Dönitz 2016; Goodman 2019: 31–5.

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son Zepho came to Hesperia with Aeneas and later became Janus-Saturn, the first god-king of Latium.[31] After these arresting prolegomena, the text begins relating Jewish history from the time of Daniel down to Masada. Initially, it draws primarily on Josephus' *Antiquities*, but the story of the Great Revolt mostly derives from Pseudo-Hegesippus.

What is particularly noticeable, though not surprising, about its handling of Pseudo-Hegesippus is how it skilfully and completely eradicates any trace of that text's Christian supersessionism. The idea that 70 was the Jews' punishment for killing Christ is wholly excised and (as in Josephus) the destruction is instead explained as a punishment for the transgressions of the Jewish rebels. The Masada episode, which ends the text, is reworked significantly: now, instead of committing collective suicide, the warriors on the rock launch what they know will be a doomed final assault against the Romans and die in battle (*Sefer Yosippon* 89). Future-oriented content is added to the Masada story too (89):

> May it be the will of God our Lord that he remember the oath of our ancestors. May he rebuild our city, and may he renew our Temple. May he gather our dispersed and collect our banished and return our captives. May he hasten our messiah and hurry our redemption. May he cause our enemies to fall and humble those who hate us.[32]

As we have seen, Pseudo-Hegesippus made Masada the end of Jewish history. By additions such as these, the author of *Yosippon* makes it very clear that this is not the case.

It is in this heavily adapted version that 'Josephus' would primarily be encountered by Jewish readers for most of the next millennium, in the Latin West, the Greek East, and beyond.[33] This would only begin to change in the nineteenth century, when the advent of the academic movement known as *Wissenschaft des Judentums* ('scientific study of Judaism') would inspire greater interest in the Greek texts and stimulate Hebrew and Yiddish translations of Josephus' original works.[34]

[31] On Zepho, see Bowman 2019: 57–8.
[32] Translation from Bowman 2023.
[33] On the Jewish reception of *Yosippon*, see Dönitz 2015; Goodman 2019: 33–5.
[34] *Wissenschaft des Judentums* largely amounted to the application to ancient Jewish material of the forms of philological and source-critical scholarship which prevailed in contemporary classics. For *Wissenschaft* more broadly, see Goodman 2018: 447, 462–3. For its impact on receptions of Josephus, see Goodman 2019: 88–94.

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The 'rediscovery' of Greek learning in western Europe in the fifteenth century brought Josephus' Greek texts back into circulation, and at the same time the spread of mechanized printing expanded the reach of his works. Peter Burke has surveyed printed editions of classical historians between 1450 and 1700 with the aim of discovering their relative 'popularity', measured by the number of different printings.[35] Josephus is, across this long period, consistently the most 'popular' Greek-language historian. The seventy-three editions of the *Antiquities* and the sixty-eight editions of the *War* are almost double the number of printings of authors whom we might expect to be more widely read, Herodotus (forty-four) and Thucydides (forty-one). Burke also notes the popularity of vernacular translations of Josephus, second only to Tacitus among the authors surveyed.[36] One possible reason for the popularity of the vernacular *Antiquities* may have been the dubious legal status in this period of translations of the bible. Translations of the *Antiquities* were a way in which people could experience biblical stories in their own language without risking censure or punishment.[37]

It was during this period of early printed versions of Josephus that the passage of our author which is perhaps most famous nowadays first came to prominence in religious polemics. The *Testimonium Flavianum* is a short passage from the eighteenth book of the *Jewish Antiquities* which mentions the crucifixion of Jesus, and which also attributes to him great miracles and messianic status.[38] No Josephus scholar working today believes that the text of the *Testimonium* as we currently have it actually goes back to Josephus; however, some have concluded that, though the passage has been doctored by Christian copyists, it is probably based on a brief note on Jesus which originates with Josephus.[39] The *Testimonium* was noticed by early Christians, of course, but it really came to prominence in the Italian Renaissance, initially in the works of the Christian humanist scholars Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) and Bartolomeo Platina (1421–81). From their time on, the passage was often cited as a Jewish witness to the divinity of Christ.[40]

[35] Burke 1966.
[36] Burke 1966: 138.
[37] Castelli 2016: 408–9.
[38] *AJ* 18.63–4. On the *Testimonium* more broadly, see Whealey 2003, 2016.
[39] On the modern controversy, see Whealey 2003: 165–201.
[40] Kokin 2016. See also Castelli 2016.

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By the early eighteenth century, Josephus' texts were sufficiently familiar for authors to include complex allusions to them which expected knowledge of the originals on the part of readers.[41] Familiarity was greatly facilitated by the proliferation of vernacular translations, which were made into many European languages from the fifteenth century on. Gohei Hata (more on whom shortly) has catalogued all known English versions between 1602 and 1912, and found no fewer than twelve different translations, some with multiple editions.[42] Despite all this competition, one version came unquestionably to be the most successful of all the English Josephuses. In 1737, William Whiston published his monumental translation of the complete works. A one-time professor of mathematics at Cambridge who lost his chair because of his eccentric religious opinions, Whiston devoted much of his enforced early retirement to this work. The result is not fully satisfactory as a translation, but for all its flaws it is easy to understand why Whiston came to enjoy such a wide readership. His English style is fluent, expressive, and highly readable even today.

Whiston's edition would be a runaway success: so many different printings of his translation were carried by so many presses across the Anglophone world that it may indeed be impossible to determine just how many editions existed.[43] Throughout the later eighteenth and nineteenth century, Whiston became an essential companion to the bible, a presence in a great many English-speaking homes, even among the relatively humble. Fuelled by Whiston's success, references to Josephus appear in the works of significant authors of the era: Mark Twain, Thomas Hardy, and Rudyard Kipling.[44] Whiston's great success may have ushered in the historical high-water mark of Josephan popularity in Anglophone countries. For good and ill, Whiston is still very much with us, as the most easily accessible free English version of Josephus' works online.

[41] See, for instance, the complex Josephan allusions in Defoe's fictionalized *Journal of a Plague Year* (Nicholson 1919: 14–16), or Jonathan Swift alluding to the *Jewish War*, the source of one of the archetypal myths of infant cannibalism, in a treatise which satirically suggests that the babies of the poor should be sold as food to the rich as a solution to poverty in Ireland (Swift 2018: 156–7).

[42] Hata 2016.

[43] Goodman 2019: 84–6.

[44] For the references to these authors, see Goodman 2019: 86–7; on Whiston more broadly, Goodman 2019: 84–7.

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'Masada shall not fall again': Josephus in the twentieth century

Highly significant events of the 1930s and 1940s – the rise of Nazism, the Holocaust in Europe, and the foundation of the state of Israel in the Middle East – created new priorities in twentieth-century Josephan receptions. We will begin in Europe. After a promising early career, the Jewish novelist and playwright Lion Feuchtwanger was, in 1933, stripped of his German citizenship by the new Nazi administration and forced to relocate, first to France and then to Los Angeles. It was during this unsettled period, between 1932 and 1942, that he would produce an important trilogy of historical novels featuring Josephus as protagonist, and chronicling the life of the historian from his embassy to Nero to his (imagined) ignominious death on a Galilean hillside.[45] Feuchtwanger's Josephus is a memorable protagonist, alternating between delusional self-assurance and bouts of paralysing self-doubt, torn between the ardent Jewish 'nationalism' of his youth and his later ambitions to become a cosmopolitan 'citizen of the world'.

The first book focuses on the period of the Jewish Revolt itself, as Josephus drifts from ardent anti-colonial passion to nascent cosmopolitanism. By its close, Josephus' malady is appreciated by Tiberius Julius Alexander, a Jewish apostate and Roman imperial administrator who accompanies Titus to Jerusalem: 'This man Josephus wants to have it all, both Judaism and Hellenism. That is not possible, dear fellow. Jerusalem and Rome, Isaiah and Epicurus: these things cannot be reconciled. We must choose one over the other.'[46] The second book depicts Josephus as a successful author in Rome following the publication of the *Jewish War*, and concentrates on his attempts to raise his two sons: one, raised in Judaism, is killed by a malicious prank of his Gentile playmates; the other, raised Greek, casts off all attachments to Judaism and goes to Judaea with the Roman army. The final book depicts the reign of Domitian, 'master and god', who sees himself as the enemy of the Jewish God, and whose rise to power is accompanied by widespread violence against Jews, in scenes likely to remind Feuchtwanger's readers of the rise of fascism in Germany. Finally, our hero returns to his homeland and abandons his cosmopolitan ideals completely. When revolt begins stirring once

[45] All three volumes in the original German are conveniently collected in Feuchtwanger 2013. English translations are also available: Feuchtwanger 1932, 1936, and 1942.

[46] Feuchtwanger 2013: 337.

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again under Trajan, he throws himself into it with the same spirit as he had as a young man, and ends up killed by soldiers under the command of his estranged Roman son Paulus.

Feuchtwanger's Josephus trilogy is a stunning achievement of historical imagination, but also a somewhat dispiriting read, particularly when its context is remembered. The author finds in Josephus echoes of the mid-twentieth-century European Jewish experience, explicating the agonies of recent history through this vivid figure from antiquity. The books raise questions concerning the difficulty of maintaining a colonially hyphenated identity, especially when different parts of that identity seem to be pulling in different directions; they also illuminate the dangers of living as part of a minority, perpetually dependent on the goodwill and 'tolerance' of a fickle majority. Above all, in Josephus' final rejection of his quest to become a Greek–Roman–Jew, the trilogy speaks to the tragic failure of the optimistic cosmopolitanism which characterized liberal German circles prior to the rise of Nazism.

In the Middle East, Josephan receptions have focused on the Masada episode. Reverence for Josephus' Masada narrative predated the foundation of the state of Israel. In 1920, during the British Mandate, the Ukrainian poet Yitzhak Lamdan immigrated to the region and would subsequently publish *Masada*, a Hebrew epic poem which engages with the Josephan account (possibly via *Sefer Yosippon*) while celebrating the stories of those early immigrants, drawn to the ancestral land by the promise of imminent nationhood.[47] Lamdan uses the word 'Masada' not to denote the rock itself but as a metonym for the entire envisioned state, proudly defended but hemmed in by perceived enemies. Modern readers have detected deep ambivalences in his reception of Josephus' account (perhaps mirroring the ambivalences in Josephus' own tonally elusive presentation of the siege), and a concern that Israel could become a trap, rather than a sanctuary, for the Jewish people.[48] Even the poem's most famous line, 'Masada shall not fall again', which would have a long afterlife as an Israeli patriotic slogan, reflects ambivalence: note that it does not present the defenders of Masada as heroes, but rather as a negative *exemplum* whose behaviour must not be imitated. But the subsequent reception of this poem in Israel would largely be deaf to these ambiguities and reservations: it

[47] On *Sefer Yosippon*, see Y. Feldman 2009.

[48] On the ambivalences, see B. Schwartz et al. 1986: 155–8; Ben-Yehuda 1995: 220–3; Y. Feldman 2009.

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became a foundational document for nationalists and an essential set text in schools.[49] Lamdan laid the foundations for Masada's future status as a secular pilgrimage site in a land otherwise full of actual pilgrimage sites.

It was in the 1960s that the 'Masada myth' truly took off. Building on exploratory surveys by earlier visitors such as Shmaryahu Guttman, the eminent Israeli archaeologist and former Chief of Staff of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) Professor Yigael Yadin oversaw extensive excavations of the plateau between 1963 and 1965.[50] A gifted communicator, Yadin's media appearances helped to transform his excavations into a global sensation, attracting volunteers from around the world, all assisted by logistical support from the IDF. In 1966, Yadin published a lavishly illustrated book presenting his findings to a general audience, entitled in its English edition *Masada. Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand*. The presentation of the finds to a non-specialist readership is exemplary; their interpretation is sometimes less so. Yadin seems driven to use the material evidence to 'support' his reading of the mass suicide of the Masada defenders in *Jewish War* 7. Indeed, close to the beginning he revealingly writes 'It would be one of the tasks of our archaeological expedition to see what evidence we could find to support the Josephus record.'[51]

Yadin often seems eager to explain away discrepancies between the material remains and Josephus' account.[52] He can also offer somewhat tenuous interpretations, seemingly in order to validate elements of Josephus' story. For instance, he suggests that the twelve ostraca bearing Hebrew names which were found in one part of the Northern Palace may be the remains of the ten lots which were drawn as part of the suicide pact in Josephus' narrative, despite numerous possible objections (not least that there were twelve of them, rather than ten).[53] As Nachman Ben-Yehuda has discussed, Yadin publicly presented the partial remains of three individuals found on the lower terrace of the Northern Palace as a 'zealot' commander and his wife and child, despite the fact that documented discussions between the

[49] Ben-Yehuda 1995: 222–3.
[50] For the contributions of Guttman, see Ben-Yehuda 1995: 50–3; Goodman 2019: 127–9.
[51] Yadin 1966: 15.
[52] See, for example, Magness 2019: 192 on Yadin's explanation for the evident fire damage to the storage areas, contradicting Josephus' statement that the rebels left their provisions untouched at the time of their suicide.
[53] Yadin 1966: 197–201. See also Magness 2019: 195.

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excavators had previously established that the three people could not have been a family unit.[54] And even his reading of Josephus seems partial. Note how, in the book's title and throughout, Yadin refers to the defenders of Masada as 'zealots', despite Josephus' consistent identification of them as *sicarii*. Was Yadin attempting to associate the defenders with a Jewish rebel faction who were rather easier to admire than the *sicarii*, portrayed in Josephus as problematic 'terrorists'?

Yadin's excavations, and his somewhat sensationalist publication of them, had a strong effect, and the tale of Masada, as derived from (an Israeli nationalist reading of) Josephus' work, came to be widely disseminated and celebrated in various areas of Israeli life. School trips to the site became all but mandatory; the IDF swore in members of the armoured divisions on the plateau until 1991; visiting US presidents were given tours of the site.[55] Thus a narrative written by Josephus came to be central to the self-image and national consciousness of a modern state. But much time has passed since the publication of Yadin's archaeological blockbuster, and it has come under attack from several directions. Archaeologists have queried his interpretations of material evidence; historians and literary scholars have problematized his heroic reading of Josephus; and modern sociologists have investigated the undesirable effects of the 'Masada complex' on contemporary Israel.[56] However, unlike the 960 *sicarii*, the 'Masada myth' does not die easily. Visitors who take the cable car up to the site are still treated to a ten-minute informational video which relates Yadin's preferred heroic reading of the Josephan narrative, all enlivened by footage from the 1981 American television miniseries *Masada*, which was filmed on-site and features the great Peter O'Toole as Flavius Silva.

The use of the Masada narrative by the Israeli right has, in turn, prompted dissident readings of that episode. In 2005, the Israeli documentarian Avi Mograbi premiered his film *Avenge but One of My Two Eyes*, which engages closely with the modern legacy of Josephus' Masada episode. The film is structured around a telephone conversation between Mograbi and a Palestinian friend, but the discussion is intercut with scenes from contemporary Israel and

[54] Ben-Yehuda 1995: 67–8.

[55] On school trips, see Ben-Yehuda 1996: 163–78; on the IDF, see Ben-Yehuda 1996: 147–62; on presidential visits, see Magness 2019: 198–9.

[56] Archaeologists: Magness 2019. Historians and literary scholars: Vidal-Naquet 1978; Cohen 1982b; Ladouceur 1987; Chapman 2007b. Sociologists: B. Schwartz et al. 1986; Ben-Yehuda 1996.

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Palestine which suggest startling and uncomfortable parallels between ancient and modern. We see scenes of Palestinian civilians being treated humiliatingly by soldiers; we also follow groups of religious tourists being shown around the Masada site, and watch as they are given the heroic version of Josephus' story, including a dramatic reading of Eleazar's speech. The film juxtaposes the Israeli right's veneration of ancient martyrs, those who preferred death to oppression under occupation, with its unwillingness to concede that similar motivations may animate Palestinian militants. It works largely through striking parallels. As Mograbi's friend passionately discourses on how Israel has made death preferable to life for Palestinians, he seems to become a modern-day Eleazar; similarly, the Israeli soldiers become Romans, a particularly provocative comparison, given the IDF's use of Masada for military ceremonial. Mograbi's documentary suggests that, far from being the sole property of Israeli nationalists, Josephus' Masada narrative has broad resonance. It accuses Josephus' account of contributing to the dehumanization of Palestinians which is evident in some parts of Israeli society, but it simultaneously suggests that the 'Masada myth' contains within it the potential to elicit something which can be in short supply: Israeli empathy for Palestinian suffering.

The potentially broad resonance of the *Jewish War* is also illustrated by its Japanese translation by the distinguished classicist and biblical scholar Gohei Hata, completed when Hata returned to Japan after obtaining his PhD in Philadelphia in 1985. In a talk on his career given at Clare Hall, Cambridge in 2013, Prof. Hata recalls an interesting detail about his experience:

> As soon as I returned to Japan from America, a publisher in Tokyo gave me a chance to translate the works of Josephus from Greek into Japanese. I presume my publisher had already read Josephus in English translation. He showed me his keen interest in Josephus because of his past experiences in the [Second] World War. . .He was thinking about reasons why Japan – such a small country, like the country of the Jewish people – fought against America, which could be likened to the Roman Empire. He was also trying to explain the appearance of military fanaticism by comparing it with the fanaticism of the zealots described fully in the *Jewish War*.[57]

Prof. Hata leaves the final compelling parallel unspoken: both conflicts ended with spectacular acts of violent destruction which transformed the societies in question, at Hiroshima and Nagasaki as much as at

[57] Hata 2013.

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Jerusalem. Hata (or at least his publisher) thus sees in Josephus a text which carries lessons for his own people, and for interpreting the traumas of recent history.

Gohei Hata's Japanese Josephus and Avi Mograbi's Palestinian Masada suggest that, although the *Jewish War* may have particular resonance for Jewish readers, it also has the power to speak to any national, ethnic, or religious community grappling with legacies of collective trauma. When Feuchtwanger, Lamdan, Yadin, Mograbi, and Hata reach back to this ancient text to illuminate contemporary concerns, they are following the example of the author of that ancient text, who read the trauma of the fall of the Second Temple in the light of the biblical accounts of the fall of the First, a layered demonstration of the therapeutic potential of historiography.

A Josephus for our times

Josephus continues to be a useful tool to think with today. I will complete this survey of Josephan receptions by focusing on two early twenty-first-century novels which engage closely with his works, and consider how those works are being used in the present.

In 2011 *The Dovekeepers* was published, a historical novel by the American author Alice Hoffman, which relates the tale of the fall of Masada in ways which are clearly informed by Josephus' narrative, but which also represent a strikingly different perspective from that of the historian. Josephus mentions that there were women and children on the rock at the time of the siege: he informs us that some of the *sicarii* had brought their families with them (*BJ* 7.321). However, he tells us almost nothing about them. The only times they are prominent in the narrative are when they are being massacred by their menfolk (*BJ* 7.389–400) and at the very end, when female voices finally emerge as witnesses in the two women and five children who escaped the mass suicide by hiding in a cistern (*BJ* 7.399). Again, Josephus tells us nothing about them at all, not even their names, other than to inform us, helpfully, that one of the two adults was unusually intelligent for a woman.

Hoffman gives these women names: Revka, the baker's wife, and Yael, daughter of a notorious sicarian assassin. These two women each narrate a section of the novel, as do two other characters, Shirah, a 'witch' from Alexandria, and her child, who was raised female

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but later took the male name Aziza and fought alongside the *sicarii* warriors. We learn their histories and their motivations for retreating to the desert, and with them we experience the Roman occupation, the Revolt, life on the rock, and the final terrifying apocalypse, witnessing a Josephan narrative through a series of un-Josephan viewpoints.

Neither Romans nor *sicarii* emerge from this work with much credit. Hoffman is unsparing in her depictions of the brutalities of the occupation, from the anarchy and terror of the siege and fall of Jerusalem to a particularly shocking scene where a group of deserters from the Tenth Legion torture, rape, and kill Revka's daughter in the wilderness.[58] But the *sicarii* seem little better, often taciturn, cruel, and capable only of devotion to their cause. Through the eyes of Aziza, we are shown the extreme brutalities which these bandit raiders inflict on Jewish communities close to their stronghold.[59] By re-narrating Josephus through such radically altered perspectives, Hoffman creates a Masada for the twenty-first century, which amplifies silenced and ignored voices, and which depicts a world in which neither the crass brutalities of colonialism nor the terrifying certainties of religious or nationalist extremism seem like appealing alternatives.

The British novelist Naomi Alderman published *The Liars' Gospel* in 2012. The work presents four alternatives to the New Testament Gospels, tales of the life of Jesus told from the perspectives of Miryam (the Virgin Mary), Iehuda (Judas), Caiaphas, and Bar-Avo (Barabbas). The Gospels are, predictably enough, very important intertexts for this work, but so too are the works of Josephus, especially the *Jewish War*. Josephan material is important throughout, as Alderman narrates numerous episodes related by the historian, but the voice of Josephus seems especially present in the portion of the work that centres on Caiaphas, the high priest who presided over Jesus' trial and the son-in-law of Annas, the most powerful man in Jerusalem. What is striking about the Caiaphas section is just how small a part of it is constituted by the trial of Jesus: Caiaphas spends most of his 'gospel' focused on more important affairs, principally Pontius Pilate's incendiary demand that the Temple should furnish him with money for the construction of an aqueduct (an episode related by Josephus: *BJ* 2.175–7; *AJ* 18.60–2), and his concerns about his wife's infidelity.

[58] Hoffman 2011: 12–14, 195–203.
[59] Hoffman 2011: 396–400.

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The depiction of Caiaphas in the novel is extraordinarily sympathetic, much more so than many representations of this figure.[60] He is not depicted as a soulless legalist or as a careerist villain. His highest goal throughout is the maintenance of peace with Rome for essentially pious reasons: war would disrupt the offering of the sacrifices as mandated by Torah, and therefore all steps must be taken to avoid conflict. In *The Liars' Gospel*, the Jewish leadership, so often vilified in Christian representations, are reasonable, wise, and correct in their assessment of the situation. On her website, Alderman explains that, as someone who was raised Orthodox Jewish, she grew up self-identifying as a Pharisee, following the traditional identification of the Pharisees as the forerunners of the rabbis. Thus, she found herself alienated by hostile Christian representations of the Pharisees, and of the Jewish leadership of the time (which she identifies with the Pharisees).[61] Through Josephus, another self-identifying Pharisee, Alderman finds the means to construct a kinder reading of these figures which casts the perceived intellectual ancestors of modern Judaism in a more compassionate light. And here one is surely struck by the malleability of Josephan receptions. The same author, and the same text, used by Christian authors to bolster fundamentally anti-Jewish notions of supersessionism are also used by a Jewish author to redeem the forerunners of modern Judaism from two millennia of Christian contempt. One certainly feels that Josephus would have been happier with the modern usage than the ancient.

Conclusion

Down the centuries, Josephus has been many things. In his own lifetime he was a priest, a rebel, a general, a prophet, a prisoner, a traitor, and an intellectual. But perhaps above all, and relatively consistently across the many phases of his life (albeit in different ways), he was a champion of his people, defending them from outside attack, advocating for their dignity and importance, and remaining steadfast in his commitment to his culture despite his 'betrayal' at Jotapata. Since his death, this already expansive resumé has become even more wide-ranging. As we have seen in this chapter, the works

[60] For negative receptions of Caiaphas, see Bond 2004: 9–16; Reinhartz 2011.
[61] https://naomialderman.com/books (accessed 26 February 2024).

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of Josephus have been used and abused at many different times, by many different reading communities and for many different purposes, more indeed than this survey has had the space to cover. He has provided Christian readers with material to reinforce the notion that Judaism was a dead religion abandoned by its God; he has also been used by Jewish authors to refute and reject Christian contempt of Judaism. He has been an authoritative source for the history of his people for Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. From Tel Aviv to Tokyo his historical vision has spoken to the concerns of the modern world, along the way bolstering both Israeli nationalism and advocacy for Palestine. He has adorned both the medieval stage and Hollywood's silver screen, prefigured the anxieties and ambivalences of life for European Jews in the twentieth century, served as a point of reference for major authors in the English canon, and enjoyed a level of consistent popularity which the great majority of ancient authors would envy. In their own quiet way, his works rank among the most broadly influential literary productions of classical antiquity.

But if there is one other thing which Josephus has become, at least in Classics departments in the last hundred years or so, it is a 'minor author', a name to be referenced but not engaged with, a figure to be hurried past with minimal fuss on undergraduate courses in Roman historiography as they rush on their way from Velleius to Tacitus. This minimization of his importance seems to be out of keeping with the large footprint that his works have left on world culture, and looks even more difficult to justify in what purports to be an age of decolonization. Josephus' awkward hyphenated identity, which renders him not straightforwardly 'Greek' or 'Roman', may once have seemed like sufficient reason to keep him off Classical syllabuses. It no longer seems sufficient. If anything, his complex identity should nowadays be a reason for closer and more extensive engagement.

It is easy enough for classicists and ancient historians to lament the lack of 'provincial literatures' from the Roman world. This justifies us maintaining a close, even an exclusive, focus on those authors who have long been considered central to the canon, and who are generally unproblematically Greek or Roman in ways that Josephus is not. But the fact is that provincial literatures are out there, in some quantity: all we need to do is look. Classics will not long be able to escape the charges of Eurocentricism and dead-white-maleism if it cannot find space for this wider world: not just Josephus, but also Philo of Alexandria; Manetho, Berossus, and Philo of Byblos; the

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Habakkuk Pesher and the Edicts of Ashoka; the book of Revelation, the Avesta, and the Qur'an; the Egyptian *Lamb's Oracle* and the poetry of Ephrem the Syrian; the hexameters of legionaries from Bu Njem in Libya and the verse epitaphs of Roman Britain. There are literary worlds far beyond the 'canon' that we learn as undergraduates, and perhaps this is what Josephus could be for our subject at this time: an invitation to establish a broader, more inclusive, and richer definition of which texts get to count as 'classics'.

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