

Interpreting Josephus Contextually: Composition, Audiences, Messages, and Meaning

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When this volume's editors kindly invited my participation in the initiating conference, with its focus on Josephus' reception and *Sefer Yosippon*, I suggested offering something general: a reference point in Josephus research for the original reception-historical investigations. Our hosts' agreement explains why this contribution is so broad, in contrast to the specific studies that follow.

It is not possible here to work through all the approaches that Josephus research has taken through the past two centuries, let alone their contexts or the reasons for them. Louis Feldman's annotated bibliography to 1980 and the Blackwell *Companion to Josephus*, edited by Nora Chapman and Zuleika Rodgers (2016), largely cover that terrain.¹ For present purposes, with a chapter of real estate, I propose to adopt an angle from which to view the history of research, with the aim of drawing out what might be *at stake* in the methods that have been used for exploiting Josephus' precious material. The long title indicates the angle I have adopted: the need for contextual interpretation.

Argumentative essays typically begin with a definition of key terms. The seven terms in my title have fairly obvious meanings, however, and so we may move directly to their application. If there is a thesis underlying this survey, it is the simple one that, although my title reflects questions we routinely ask of classical or biblical texts (Thucydides, Polybius, or Tacitus; the Bible's Deuteronomist, 1–2 Chronicles; each of the NT gospels), as for example in introductory volumes, it has taken a long time to broach them in Josephus research. Tellingly, we still lack an *Einleitung in Josephus*, which would take up these questions in depth.² But we *should* ask them because they are basic to historical inquiry.

¹ Feldman, *Modern Scholarship*; Chapman and Rodgers, *Companion*.

² Thackeray's 1928 lectures (*Josephus: The Man and the Historian*, 1929) were the closest approximation for more than half a century, then Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and his Society* (1983), and Bilde, *Flavius Josephus between Jerusalem and Rome* (1988). Of these, only Bilde offers a methodical survey of Josephus' works, though in a highly compressed single chapter (3); cf. the third chapter of Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament* (2003).

In the mid-1970s, W.C. van Unnik rightly observed that Josephus was everywhere *used and cited*, but rarely studied as an author.³ His observation found support in Feldman's 1,000+ page bibliography a few years later, which faithfully reflected the main areas of research to 1980 (e.g., Josephus' sources, biblical paraphrase, treatment of specific questions and periods, comparison with other texts, and reception history) but needed no sections on the structures, aims, themes, or audiences of Josephus' histories.⁴ Scholars had not yet formulated these as objects of curiosity. Even that work's 2.5 pages on historiography (118–120) focus on Josephus' competence, accuracy, or reliability, rather than questions we usually associate with ancient historiography.⁵ Likewise, in Per Bilde's exhaustive research in all European languages for his 1988 study of Josephus, he could find no studies of basic introductory matters in relation to the two main histories.⁶ *Interpreting* Josephus' works contextually as whole compositions is of course not the only occupation for a historian of Roman Judea. But this chapter argues that it ought to be *one basic concern*—also useful for comparison with later reworkings of Josephus—and illustrates why this is so.

In case the point seems too obvious in the 2020s to need elaboration, I should add that there remains considerable scope for misunderstanding. I speak from experience, as my efforts to interpret Josephus have struck a surprising number of colleagues as though I were advocating a new-fangled, even “postmodern,” departure from serious history.⁷ It is as if one hears the screams of academic sergeants, accusing one of malingering: “Real men quickly deduce what happened from Josephus, Mason! Why are you hanging about in the rear, stuck on his text? Get out into the fray! Say what happened if you are game!”

This is an unfortunate misunderstanding. Since my first book I have argued that the interpretation of Josephus—like the interpretation of any text, coin, or building remains—should be a distinct but *essential part* of

3 Van Unnik, *Schriftsteller*, 18.

4 Cf. the detailed table of contents in Feldman, *Modern Scholarship*, v–xv.

5 For the usual issues (authority of the writer, moral intervention and reflection, the nature of truth being sought, rhetorical values, mode of investigation, typical themes and tropes, vivid excursus, speeches), see Marincola, *Authority and Tradition* (which makes extensive use of Josephus as exemplary); Pitcher, *Writing Ancient History*; and for some of these issues in Josephus, Villalba i Varneda, *The Historical Method*.

6 Bilde, *Josephus*, 70–71 (“The contents of *Bell.* are not usually rendered in the literature on Josephus;” “To the best of my knowledge, no contribution to a discussion on the arrangement and plan of *Bell.* is to be found”). Cf. p. 89 on *Antiquities* (he finds a few pages in an article by one scholar).

7 Documenting these misguided impressions, some forcefully expressed, would serve no further purpose. Let us move on.

historical investigation, not something separate.⁸ I also made clear my debts, to the rather old-fashioned methods of R.G. Collingwood, Marc Bloch, Arnaldo Momigliano, and then-prominent applications by Jacob Neusner—no postmodernists or historical shirkers among them.⁹ The patient interpretation of evidence is not subversive, communist, nihilist, atheist, postmodern, leftist, or indeed theological. It is *history*. All respectable investigation—legal, scientific, and medical—follows a similar scheme. One must understand evidence first *for what it is* (cf. symptoms or presentation of physical phenomena) before trying to explain it. A passing rash or headache, apparently caused by ad hoc circumstances, needs a different explanation from something chronic. It is worth imagining invisible causes of the evidence we can see only when we have a preliminary understanding of what we are looking at, what needs explaining.

Dissertation research introduced me to a small choir of seekers, as diverse as Helgo Lindner, Harold Attridge, Tessa Rajak, and Jacob Neusner, who from various perspectives were calling for a better understanding of Josephus' works before using them in reconstructing the past.¹⁰ Brill's international translation and commentary project is one expression of this concern.¹¹ In what follows, I hope to give readers mainly interested in the later reception of Josephus a sense of directions in Josephus research but especially of what is at stake in them—once we get past the hobgoblins of postmodernism or perceived solipsism. My perception of the stakes will become clear en route.

1 Josephus

Josephus in the title requires the least discussion. The man whose writings lie at the center of our interest was one of many first-century Josephs, but what an extraordinary impact he had! Born in Jerusalem in the year of Gaius Caligula's accession (37 CE), he seems to have departed life in Rome, early in Trajan's reign (98–117). The first half of his years he spent in Judea, the latter half in Rome, though near the end of the Judean period he undertook a successful diplomatic mission to the imperial capital, ca. 63–65 (v 13–16). His remarkable

8 Mason, *Josephus on the Pharisees*, 1–17.

9 Collingwood, *Idea of History*; Bloch, *Historian's Craft*; Momigliano, "Rules of the Game" and "Historicism," with Bowersock, "Quest for the Person." To mention only a few salient examples from Neusner's immense *oeuvre*: *Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees*; *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah*; *Politics to Piety*.

10 Lindner, *Geschichtsauffassung*; Attridge, *Interpretation*; Rajak, *Josephus*; Neusner as in previous note.

11 Mason, ed., *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*.

life experiences, first as an active priest-aristocrat in the Judean capital, then preparing Galilee for Roman retaliation after the lethal unrest of 66, then as a Roman prisoner for two years (67–69), and finally as a free man at large in Rome (71 onward), were matched only by the unparalleled posthumous fate of his work. Thirty Greek volumes, probably not everything he wrote, have survived more or less intact, a rare feat among ancient texts.

Having quickly outclassed his rivals as the go-to author for Judean matters—Tacitus and the author of Luke-Acts may already have used his work; Aelius Herodian in the second century treats him as *the* authority on Judea—Josephus was adopted with increasing eagerness by Christian writers. They saw the destruction of Jerusalem as proof of a permanent divine divestment from Jerusalem and all it had represented. When Constantine decided to support Christianity in the early fourth century, who better to validate Christian claims about Jerusalem's catastrophe than the star witness: a Jerusalemite who loved the city, its laws, and culture, and therefore could not be accused of Christian bias? In medieval times, though he had no share in the rabbis' halakhic and haggadic explorations, Josephus came back into Jewish hands around 1000 CE with *Sefer Yosippon*. His work would remain essential in the Renaissance, before it became vitally important to critical scholarship, from its embryonic impulses in the sixteenth to the minutely detailed analysis of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I need say no more about Josephus' impact, however, as it is the subject of expert papers in this volume. It seems fair to say, though one must do so without statistical proof, that Josephus became the most widely read and warmly embraced ancient writer outside the Bible in western history.¹²

But what should we *do* with the thirty volumes that Josephus unknowingly bequeathed to us? That is our concern here. In the latter half of the 1980s, Louis Feldman and Gohei Hata, seeing the contrast between the towering importance of Josephus and the dearth of publications on him, commissioned essays representing the state of scholarship.¹³ Their topics are telling because they are so scattered. The few that relate to Josephus' narratives are on very small issues (Justus, Masada, passages in the biblical paraphrase), whereas most concern his use of sources, comparison with other material, or reception history. Those volumes were nonetheless a harbinger of the gathering interest in Josephus in the late 1980s. It was not a complete surprise, therefore, when a few years

12 See Feldman and Hata, *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*, 13–16, for Feldman's compelling account of Josephus' impact.

13 *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity* (1987, 13–14 on their purpose) and *Josephus, the Bible, and History* (1989).

later Joseph Sievers and Fausto Parente organized an international conference on Josephus in San Miniato, Italy (1992), supported by a bequest from the late Morton Smith.

When they scoured the planet for Josephus experts, Parente and Sievers found about two dozen scholars, including Feldman and Hata as well as young colleagues who had recently published their first contributions.¹⁴ Josephus research was on the cusp of becoming a recognized field. As is still the case, however, those who worked significantly on the corpus taught in classics, Jewish history, religious studies, and theology.

San Miniato was to my knowledge the first truly international gathering devoted to the critical study of Josephus. His name was long known to anyone who worked in ancient Judaism, Christian origins, or the classical world, of course, as the main source for Roman Judea. Emil Schürer's multi-volume handbook on the subject illustrated, however, van Unnik's observation above. Explaining that Josephus' works "provide the main source for the history studied here,"¹⁵ Schürer and his revisers then took over much of Josephus' outlook along with his data (the two cannot be separated). Their notes offer occasional criticism, after comparison with other sources, and point out some inconsistencies. But that monumental study, in its various editions, lacks any analysis of Josephus as an author or his works as compositions.¹⁶ Like its poorer cousins, it shows no curiosity about what the corpus *is*: why he wrote, how (historiography or rhetoric), for whom, or with what interests, themes, and literary techniques. Tellingly, when Schürer and his editors come to discuss Jewish literature in the third volume, which obliges them to mention Josephus (he is the

14 The proceedings are in Parente and Sievers, *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period*. Essay collections on Josephus had been rare: one scholar's collection of valuable essays from the previous decades (Schalit, *Josephus-Forschung*, 1973), a *Festschrift* covering several related fields (Betz, Haacker, and Hengel, *Josephus-Studien*, 1974), one scholar's published lectures (van Unnik, *Schrifsteller*, 1978). The San Miniato conference, however, and increasingly its many sequels in workshops and collected-essay volumes, focused on understanding Josephus as such. Many dissertations and resulting monographs in the 2000s have found untapped riches in Josephus' narratives, e.g.: Grünenfelder, *Frauen*; Landau, *Out-Heroding Herod*; Jonquière, *Prayer in Josephus*; Brighton, *The Sicarii*; Olson, *Tragedy, Authority, and Trickery*; Pena, "Temple as Cosmos;" Glas, "Fashioning the Self." The Josephus Seminar in the SBL (since 1999), which meets two or three times at the society's annual conference, remains a regular international colloquium for Josephus research.

15 Schürer, *History*, 1.43.

16 Schürer, *History*, duly includes an opening section on sources (1.17–122), in which Josephus receives the fullest discussion by far (1.43–61). But it focuses on his life, dates, and the reception (including manuscripts) of his work, otherwise offering only an unstructured list of each volume's coverage.

eleventh entry, of half a page, under “Jewish literature composed in Greek”), having listed the contents of his work in volume 1, they find less to say about his thirty-volume corpus than about non-extant texts (Demetrius, Eupolemus, Thallus). Their few sentences propose that, whereas *Antiquitates Judaicae* is “apologetic,” *Bellum Judaicum* is “history more for its own sake,” meaning that the events it relates are “so important in themselves that they seemed worthy of a detailed account”¹⁷—an appraisal that helps to explain Schürer’s way of using Josephus. No scholar could say such things today.

This is by no means to suggest that the century preceding the 1970s lacked critical research on Josephus. On the contrary, much of it was critical in the extreme, but it favored atomistic approaches in perhaps five main currents: (1) the re-use of his narratives as historical data, accepted where there was no reason to reject them and filled out with information from other literature and material remains (the Schürer model); (2) especially from about 1870 to 1920, the search for large source blocks that Josephus was thought to have sewn together, as a Judean author not considered capable of expressing his own analysis in Greek;¹⁸ (3) in sharp opposition to this assumption, a biographical approach that purported to detect Josephus’ changing loyalties from one work to the next, with hypothetical editions admixed, by focusing on selected episodes and traits;¹⁹ (4) preoccupation with Josephus’ theology, synthesized haphazardly from scattered passages and presumed to be Pharisaic;²⁰ and (5) his interpretation of the Bible in *Antiquities* 1–11.²¹ These contributions were and remain valuable, but they tended to fragment Josephus’ works, finding his meaning in comparison with external comparanda (archaeology, rabbinic literature, other rewritten Bible, the New Testament) while working from assumptions—about Judea’s level of Hellenization, his membership of the Pharisees, his limited education and political biases—that have since proven at least questionable.

Recent years have seen the revival and refinement of each of these older approaches. The new dimension, developing gradually from the 1970s, has

17 Schürer, *History*, 3:545.

18 Otto, “Herodes,” 1–15 (e.g., 12), Hölscher, “Josephus,” and Bauer, “Essener,” 404, all contributions to an influential *Realencyclopädie* for ancient history, illustrate the approach, avidly pursued in the foregoing decades.

19 See Laqueur, *Historiker*, viii, 131, 77, 123, 130, 138, 160, 231, 242.

20 Montgomery “Religion,” Schlatter, *Die Theologie des Judentums*.

21 Josephus’ biblical paraphrase (*AJ* 1–11) was early on a field of its own, studied mainly by comparison with rabbinic, other Jewish, and Greco-Roman texts rather than as part of *Antiquities* or the corpus as a whole: see Rappaport, *Agada und Exegese*; Cohen, “Josephus and Scripture;” Feldman’s essays beginning from the 1960s (many in his *Studies*); Attridge, *Interpretation*.

been a growing interest in Josephus as an author whose compositions deserve careful study *as such*. The much-discussed “linguistic turn” in humanities research, since the 1960s, as it percolated through scholars’ moods and tastes, undoubtedly had something to do with this shift. One could see it in the work of classicists; of biblical and NT scholars’ turning from form and source criticism to compositional study; and especially in Jacob Neusner’s ambitious program of trying to identify the purposes and compositional traits of each corpus of rabbinic literature, before making use of it for historical claims.²²

How precisely the larger shifts in humanities research influenced this area may not be knowable, but in concrete terms the new interest received a powerful boost from Rengstorf’s *Complete Concordance* to Josephus, published in four volumes from 1973 to 1983.²³ This invaluable reference work removed much guesswork by making it easy to study Josephus’ habits of speech. For example, scholars of a previous generation felt that certain expressions were *surely* copied from Nicolaus of Damascus or Philo of Alexandria, or contributed by Josephus’ imagined literary assistants—on the impressionistic ground that a Pharisee such as Josephus could not have composed such high-level Greek. As Harvard’s G.F. Moore put it in 1929: “At that time [in writing *Bellum Judaicum*] he cannot be presumed to have been capable of producing the kind of literary Greek which we read in the *War*.”²⁴ So, much of the work must come from sources and/or imagined ghost-writers. Now, we could check. If the language in question turns up regularly in his corpus, across all periods, we are obliged to recognize his creative work. Study of the *Concordance*, and *a fortiori* the desktop and web-based tools that have since followed, began to show what Heinz Schreckenberg had perceived in the 1970s: that Josephus exercised more control over his works, and with a more consistent palette of concerns, writing modes, and diction, than most scholars had imagined plausible.²⁵

These newer interests furnished much of the fuel for the profusion of dissertations, graduate seminars, conferences, collected-essay volumes, and commentary projects on Josephus in the past three decades. Or better: the ongoing

22 E.g., Neusner, *Politics to Piety* (p. 6): “previous studies of the Pharisees are seriously inadequate because ... the historical question has been asked too quickly”—viz. without sufficient attention to the nature of the compositions in which evidence is found.

23 Rengstorf, *Complete Concordance*.

24 Moore, “Fate and Free Will,” 383. Eisler (*Messiah Jesus*, 131) reflected prevailing assumptions when he spoke of “Josephus’ own extremely defective knowledge of the Greek language. ... He was unable to speak Greek correctly, to say nothing of writing it. ... He certainly never attempted to compose in Greek, since it was far easier for him to write the draft in Semitic and have it translated by his collaborators.”

25 Schreckenberg, *Untersuchungen*, 174.

use of Josephus among his vast constituency, for the history of Rome's empire and Judea, archeology, and New Testament background, was now interacting with compositional-interpretative research that challenged too-quick impressions of his meaning. The interplay between these approaches has nourished the field's vitality.²⁶ The resulting explosion of activity has made Josephus research an identifiable subdiscipline akin to research in the Qumran Scrolls, Philo of Alexandria, or early rabbinic literature, each of which enjoyed its own conferences and publications. Contrast the "taking for granted" of Josephus as a data-source that we saw in Schürer. Newer areas of interest include: Josephus as representative of a Judean social class and example of Mediterranean elites under Rome; the structures, themes, and diction of his works; his interactions with Graeco-Roman education (*paideia*), historiography, and rhetoric; his attempts at communication with his first audiences in Rome, informed by a realistic view of ancient book publication; and his creative use of the Bible and post-biblical texts for those purposes in Rome. Most recently, scholars have brought economic, social, gender-informed, and post-colonial models from other fields to this rich and diverse corpus.²⁷ So much for *Josephus*.

2 Interpretation and Context

Interpretation and *context*, the crucial terms in my title, are best treated together. One might suppose that everyone who deals with Josephus must interpret his work. And surely every attempt at interpretation requires a context. If so, what is new here? Surprisingly, as I have suggested above, the interpretation of Josephus' works as compositions began to take root only from the 1970s or so. That is partly because of the peculiar history of Josephus' reception (*viz.*, the long Christian exploitation and reworking of his material, followed by atomising academic study) and partly because of the way scholars tended to use all ancient narratives until the twentieth century: as data sources.

To think about what contextual interpretation might mean, it is helpful to take a step back and ask what historians do, or ought to do, when we study the human past. The remaining parts of this paper will explore aspects of contextual interpretation. But let us first contextualize that question itself in the

26 The SBL Josephus Seminar devotes one annual session to understanding Josephus' work (featuring members of the Brill commentary team), and one to "Josephus and X" (e.g., Galilee, Essenes, reception), so that advances in interpreting aspects of the corpus remain in dialogue with other disciplines, for mutual advantage.

27 E.g., Ilan, *Integrating Women*; Grünenfelder, *Frauen an den Krisenherden*; Barclay, "Empire Writes Back"; Spilsbury, "Reading the Bible in Rome;" Keddie, *Class and Power*.

larger frame of historical method. Here I can offer only a thumbnail sketch of my approach.

Present life is for each of us a chaos of unknown events and interactions that we mostly do not see or, if we see, we do not understand. None of us who does not live in Afghanistan knows what is happening there at the moment, obviously. But even those who do live somewhere in that country understand little. Although political leaders in our own states appear daily in the media, delivering carefully crafted speeches or artfully dodging interviewers' questions, we *know* little of their confidential plans. That is why Wikileaks and other whistle-blowing exercises cause such consternation. Indeed, we know little or nothing of what is happening next door, in the lives of people we pass on the street, or indeed in the minds of teenagers living under our roof. Life is infinitely complex, and we must squarely face the fact that we know almost nothing of what is going on around us now.

The past, 50 or 100 or 1,000 years ago, was no different for people who lived at the time. For us today to claim confidence about what people did and why they did it 2,000 years ago, in a faraway place under Roman rule, would therefore be absurd. If we can make modest progress in satisfying our curiosities, that is because a few bits and pieces have survived from those times to ours. Because of them, we can at least investigate the survivals and try to make sense of them: understanding what they are, what produced them, what is in them, and what they are for. If we can spot linkages and connections with other survivals, we might be able to conjure up an imaginative picture of some slivers of ancient life.

From such reflections it emerges that historians of any time and place have *two principal tasks*, which are distinct but related as yin and yang, namely: (1) interpreting what has survived, making sense of what is in front of us, and (2) reconstruction of the past that produced the survivals, which is no longer visible to us. We must imagine it. Imagination here is not fantasy, but just the same use of intelligence that is required by all sciences, to come up with explanations in the unseen world of what we can see. Both operations are forms of explanation, and both require hypothetical scenario-testing. They differ in an important way, however: the first is concerned with what sits before us (a coin, inscription, piece of pottery, foundation wall, or text), whereas the second requires us to investigate *our own questions*, about things we cannot see.

Examples of (1) are trying to understand the site of Qumran, the legend on a Herodian coin, or *Bellum Judaicum's* description of King Herod, the Pharisees, or the high priest Ananus II. These are all things we can see and try to interpret. Examples of (2) are imagining the group that once lived at Qumran and the events and motives that led to its destruction, the real Pharisees or Ananus, or

King Herod's motives as a ruler. When we are occupied with (1), the criterion for a successful hypothesis is that it explains what we are looking at, and the criteria are supplied by clues in the survival itself. We want to know what it is. When we are engaged in (2), we are investigating a problem of our devising. Then, the criteria for a good hypothesis are that it both explain *all* relevant evidence and that it fit with whatever else is thought to be understood about life in Roman times and this context. For example, if we hypothesize a ruling program for King Herod (as a Roman puppet, a Hellenistic monarch, an eastern potentate with aspirations in Parthia), our proposal must explain the remains of his building program, his coins, Josephus' extensive descriptions (with attention to sources), and other evidence. We would also need to show how our proposed image would make sense in relation to Rome's dealings with allied kings—with the proviso that if we can make a compelling case, we might also adjust common views of such kings. These considerations need not concern us much when we are simply trying to understand what Herod meant to say on one of his coins or how Josephus portrays him in *War* or *Antiquities*.

Suppose that a reader of the Gospels comes across Pontius Pilate and wants to know more about the man. The starting point for a historian is that we know nothing about Pilate in advance. We must investigate with an open mind. Our best hope for progress lies in posing particular questions, such as his dates in office in Caesarea, his relationship to his emperor Tiberius, his manner of governing (how much time visiting each city, his relations with local elites), his attitudes toward Jerusalem or Judeans, and so on. Again, investigating any such historical problem will require two distinct operations. First, we need to understand each account of Pilate or piece of relevant material evidence for itself. If we do not separate this step, we run the risk of accommodating evidence to arguments we favor—like the worst example of a prosecuting attorney or southern Sheriff in film, who has instantly decided on a conclusion and forced the evidence to produce a conviction.

In the case of Pilate, this means understanding separately the inscription from Caesarea (What is it? What was it for? What structure did it belong to?), the coins from his time in office (what are the symbols on them and what might they mean?), and the literary episodes in Philo, the Gospels, and Josephus. For each narrative we shall want to ask, "Why does this author mention Pilate? What does the episode contribute to the narrative? What themes or perspectives does it advance? How did this information about Pilate reach this author—what is its source? In other words, we first need to *interpret* what has survived before we can try to answer our questions. If the criterion for a successful answer to our questions about the historical figure is its capacity to

explain the surviving evidence, then we must first understand that evidence for itself.

To be more specific, consider the two episodes from Pilate's long tenure (18 or 26 to 36/37 CE) in Josephus' *Bellum Judaicum* (2.169–177). If these were transparent accounts of what happened, as though recorded by video, we might conclude that Pilate went to great lengths *not* to disturb Judeans: by introducing military images at night under cover and by securing Jerusalem's water supply. When his efforts faced surprising opposition, he could be quickly moved by a courageous show of Judean opposition. If, however, we realize that Judeans' death-defying courage is a root theme in *Bellum Judaicum* and that the standards and aqueduct stories are highly stylized to be a matching pair in diction and structure, that Josephus changes his perspective in *Antiquities* 18 to become more accusatory of the prefect while reworking the same stories (*AJ* 18.55–62), that Philo's account (*Legat.* 299–308) of a similar incident involves shields *without images* and yet presents Pilate as a hostile figure, in contrast to an emperor who plainly accommodates Judean concerns, and that the Gospels tend to make him a virtual saint in the trial of Jesus (in contrast to their hostile Judeans),²⁸ then we realize that Pilate inspired a wide range of portraits. Some differences, such as Josephus' shift of perspective or the Gospels' varied accounts along a trajectory, are best explained at the literary level. The point is that only when we understand the tendencies and capabilities of each narrative, in the way it refashions other material, are we in a position to produce a responsible reconstruction of the real person who inspired these pictures. We shall not emphasize, for example, features in a narrative that have little claim to reflect the real person.

Our hypothetical image of the historical Pilate will need to account, then, for the literary portraits and the material evidence, and also fit with—or modify—our general picture of how such officials functioned in Roman provincial governance. A good hypothesis will, for example, explain how Pilate remained so long in office under Tiberius (hard to imagine if he were incompetent) and the purpose of the images on his coins. Why would the auxiliary standards and Jerusalem's aqueduct be part of his responsibility, and how would such an official be expected to handle these issues in relation to the local elites under his administration? Clearly, we shall never reach certainty in such imagining. In my view, however, the act of trying to understand the surviving evidence and trying to explain it *is* history. This is a view of history as

28 See Winter, *Trial*.

an activity—"inquiry"—akin to science, not as a static body of assured knowledge, the way we often learn it in school.

The Neuserian model, of studying each kind of evidence separately before moving to historical reconstruction, now provides a standard in the field, in contrast to the older synthetic approach of Schürer.²⁹

Notwithstanding that general development, a juicier example of the stakes in historical method remains in the case of Josephus' Essenes. This group has been known continuously since the first century, because three independent and roughly contemporary authors described them with fascination and in some detail: Philo, Pliny, and Josephus. Consider just one historical question concerning the Essenes: whether they married. Josephus is the only source who includes a note (*BJ* 2.160–161) to the effect that some Essenes married. Otherwise, even he agrees (*BJ* 2.120; *AJ* 18.20–21) with the emphatic claims of Philo (*Hypothetica* apud Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 8.11.2–3, 14–15) and Pliny (*Nat.* 5.73) that Essenes do not admit women, and indeed this is one of their most outstanding traits. What should we say, then, about the historical Essenes? Did some of them marry or not?

On this question, as on others concerning the Essenes, scholars still tend to bypass the contextual interpretation of each account to move directly to a synthesis with external reference points. Assuming that Essenes produced the community rules from Qumran, in this case, they find a connection between Josephus' marrying Essenes and the *Damascus Covenant* (CD), which assumes a community of families only, as also between Josephus' singletons and 1QS, which mainly seems to assume a bachelor community, though it does not address the issue of marriage. This approach yields a superficially neat historical picture: "Both the Scrolls and the classical sources suggest that there were two basic types of Essenes, a celibate group ... and another variety, whose representatives married and had children."³⁰ That single note in *BJ* 2.160–61 becomes the voice of the classical sources, which then agree with Hebrew scrolls (which, however, say nothing about Essenes).

If, by contrast, we attend first to each source on its own, we are likely to judge the historical possibilities differently. Philo, Pliny, and Josephus give significant attention to the Essenes, each independently for his own purposes:

29 E.g., for Pilate see Bond, *Pontius Pilate*; for John the Baptist, Taylor, *The Immerser*, and Marcus, *John the Baptist*; Sievers and Levine, *The Pharisees*; and as a general approach to the history of ancient Judea, Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian*.

30 Gray, *Prophetic Figures*, 80; so also Sanders, *Judaism*, 344; Beall *Josephus' Description*, 38–39; D.R. Schwartz, *Reading the First Century*, 91–93.

Philo and Josephus are laudatory, while Pliny seems bemused. Pliny mentions them chiefly *because* their distinctive practice of celibacy is so weird, though he observes that it permits them to flourish in Judea, in sharp contrast to their now barren surroundings after 70: ruined Jerusalem and En Gedi as well as the massive rotten Judean lake (the Dead Sea). Philo, by contrast, in several portraits (*Prob.* 75–91, a lost account mentioned in *Contempl.* 1, and another lost text quoted by Eusebius), sees them as moral giants and “athletes of virtue.” Their extraordinary commitment to celibacy is a basic part of that picture (Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 8.11.1–15). All of his portraits assume that they are male communities. Josephus provides substantial new information. He too emphasizes Essene celibacy and the reasons for it, both at the beginning of his main account (*BJ* 2.120–121), and when he reprises that in *AJ* 18.20–21, declaring in the latter passage that Essenes are *males* and “do not take in wives or acquire slaves (ἄνδρες ... ὄντες. καὶ οὔτε γαμετὰς εἰσάγονται οὔτε δούλων ἐπιτηδεύουσιν κτήσιν),” but live alone and take care of each other.

If we ask how ancient readers would have understood Josephus, we have a further clue in Porphyry’s third-century *De Abstinencia* (4.11–13). Porphyry’s larger topic is abstention from animal food, and he praises Judeans in general for their rejection of certain meats. But his admiration leads him to zero in on the Essenes as representative of Judean values. He quotes the whole of Josephus’ main description almost verbatim—omitting only the remark at the end about a marrying group. As far as Porphyry and his readers are concerned, and in keeping with the earlier accounts, Essenes formed disciplined celibate male communities in Judea.

None of this means that we may simply ignore Josephus’ note about the marrying kind (*BJ* 2.160–161). We must first interpret it and then ponder its historical value. When we try to understand it as part of *War*’s narrative, paying attention to his structures, rhetoric, and communication with his audiences, it presents a number of problems. Most obviously, it is hard to explain in light of his emphasis on Essene celibacy, which has governed the entire preceding description (2.119–159). He does *not* say, as scholars often suppose: “There are *two kinds* of Essenes. Let me first describe the celibate kind and then those who marry.” No, he introduces Essenes as a single group, and describes their whole way of life on the premise that they are celibate. After explaining their reasons for this discipline (*viz.*, they do not trust women) and the practical consequences (they must adopt others’ children), it is hard to understand how he can so casually and vaguely add: “And by the way, some Essenes do marry and have children—but they are like the others in every other way.” A matrimonial option completely undermines the picture he has painted. And it contradicts his later summary description (*AJ* 18.21), according to which Essenes take no

wives—with no exceptions. How could he write that, if he knew about two kinds of Essenes?

Second, the endnote on marrying Essenes cannot be correct in claiming that such Essenes are “of one mind with the others in life-regimen, customs, and ordinances,” with the sole exception that they marry and raise children (*BJ* 2.160). His preceding description—the three-year initiation (one to prove self-control, two years sharing only holy water), surrender of all property to the quarter-master, regular travel from one Essene community to another, rising before sunrise for prayers to the sun, hard labors before communal meals taken in absolute silence, defecation (not allowed on sabbaths) into ad hoc pits dug in remote places—is conceivable (and hardly then) only with the adult male community the passage assumes. Anyone who has raised children knows that an image of Essene families following all these prescriptions would be absurd. Since he does not trouble to explain *how* Essene couples with children manage, but describes only celibate communities as the Essene way (as Philo does), his off-hand claim about others who live in precisely the same way, except with wives and children, sounds artificial and historically implausible.

Third, we then face the problem that his earlier and later insistence on Essene celibacy is independently attested in Philo and Pliny. Such attestation is rare in ancient history, and when we find it we treat it as a valuable clue to what really happened. Since Josephus mainly agrees with those two independent observers, that Essenes were celibate, his artificial-sounding remark in *BJ* 2.160–161 is all the more peculiar.

These interpretative observations prompt a straightforward historical question, namely: which hypothesis, that of celibate or marrying Essenes, better explains the evidence?

Imagining that Josephus made something up to qualify what he has already said in *War* 2 presents no problems in principle. He makes up all kinds of things and offers countless afterthoughts throughout the corpus.³¹ We would need only a plausible reason for his doing so. If we ask why he might have wished to add here (only) a claim that some Essenes married, we are not

31 All of *War*'s major speeches, though they have crucial functions in the narrative, are generally held to be Josephus' free compositions. Of the many passages that reflect ad hoc needs never seamlessly integrated, I might mention, from *BJ* 4: his portrait of Vespasian leading the charge and losing his bearings at Gamala (4.30–36), then criticizing his soldiers for doing that (4.44–48); an anonymous rogue Zealot's alleged indictment of all his comrades for doing things Josephus has attributed to the Idumeans, while persuading the Idumeans to leave and not be tainted by Zealot crimes (4.346–352 with 300–344); and the Idumeans' alleged departure en masse (4.353–354), though they evidently remain (4.566).

completely at a loss. Josephus has given the Essenes by far the greatest press among his “three schools,” before dismissing Pharisees and Sadducees in a couple of sentences. His Essenes, like Philo’s, are model Judeans and human beings. They anticipate much of what he will say about *all* Judeans in *Contra Apionem*. In that loving description, the oft-married father Josephus even identifies himself with Essene values, claiming that anyone who has tasted their philosophy finds it irresistible (*BJ* 2.158), obviously implying that he has tasted it (cf. *Vita* 10–11).

The obvious problem in making these champions of virtue representative of the whole *ethnos* and implying his affiliation is, then, that their celibate life marks them as unrepresentative. A critic might well reply: “That’s all admirable, but they must be an extraordinary group. You can’t expect us to believe that *you* or Judeans in general share such values.” It is thus not difficult, at the *purely literary level*, to imagine why Josephus might have added a vague claim about marrying Essenes after his main description. It casts a fuzzy glow over a large segment of the Judean populace, in support of his purposes in *Bellum Judaicum*: to present his people as tough and virtuous (*BJ* 1.1–8). He does not expect his audiences to ask the pesky questions that historians today pose, about how marrying Essenes could have functioned.

Which hypothesis, then, best explains the surviving evidence, once we have considered it in context? We can simply test them for their explanatory power. Either (1) it was the observable reality that there were two kinds of Essenes, marrying and celibate, and Josephus alone recalls that truth momentarily in *BJ* 2; or (2) Essenes were known to be celibate, as he also emphasizes, but the particular character of the long description in *BJ* 2 led him to make up a saving paragraph about marrying Essenes. If we formulate the question this way, we see that the two-kinds hypothesis would leave most of the evidence unexplained. If it were known that only some Essenes were celibate while others married, how and why would Philo, Pliny, and Josephus have written what they did? It would make no sense. The hypothesis that Essenes were known to be celibate, by contrast, would explain *all* the evidence without remainder—on the easily satisfied condition that Josephus’ vague note on marrying Essenes is his passing literary creation (whether or not we have the perfect explanation of his motives for it). It is easier to explain a discordant note in one author than to discount a crucial point on which three independent authors agree. The Qumran Scrolls would come into the discussion, of course, only if they were otherwise known to be Essene.

To conclude this part: interpreting Josephus (or coins, inscriptions, archaeology, or other texts) is a necessary first step in historical investigation *because* we shall eventually need to explain what has survived. This is the justification

for separating interpretation of Josephus (and every kind of surviving evidence) from the reconstruction of events and conditions. The remainder of this essay will unpack the main elements of interpretation with further examples.

3 Composition (Structures and Themes)

We have observed that before about the 1970s, scholars rarely saw a need to interpret Josephus' works as wholes, considering their structures, literary themes, or audience perceptions. To be sure, in 1896 Benedictus Niese offered outlines of each of Josephus' works, but as with Schürer (above) this was limited to a sketch of the contents. Horst Moehring, beginning with his 1957 dissertation, was possibly the first to call for attention to the narrative character of Josephus' compositions, though his few publications applied this principle to parts of *Antiquities* and still not to holistic interpretation. In the 1970s, Helgo Lindner sought a consistent thematic outlook in *Bellum Judaicum*, while granting that much of the work may have been copied from sources, through its main speeches. Soon afterward, Harold Attridge offered a thematic reading of the biblical paraphrase (*AJ* 1–11). More deliberately than any predecessor, Per Bilde (1988) tried to identify structures and coherent themes in all of Josephus' works. I had not seen his book when I submitted my dissertation (in 1986), which attempted to contribute to the then-vibrant quest for the historical Pharisees by isolating *Josephus'* Pharisees as a distinct, compositional object of investigation, a necessary preliminary to historical reconstruction.³²

The Pharisees are another good example of the historical stakes involved in the interpretation-reconstruction relationship. When I began my research, the historical Pharisees were a hot topic because the old ways of seeing them—Christian scholars via the Gospels, Jewish scholars via rabbinic literature, and everyone making assumptions about which other texts were Pharisaic or anti-Pharisaic—had been exposed as futile. In the back-to-the-drawing-board atmosphere that the 1970s generated,³³ scholars realized that one needed to put aside speculations about whether *Psalms of Solomon*, *Jubilees*, and other texts were Pharisaic, to interpret each of the accounts that drew from contemporary evidence (in the New Testament, early rabbinic literature, and Josephus) before sketching a picture of the group. Josephus' accounts took on increasing

32 Niese, "Der jüdische Historiker;" Moehring, "Novelistic Elements," "Joseph ben Matthia;" Lindner, *Geschichtsauffassung*; Attridge, *Interpretation*; Bilde, *Flavius Josephus*; Mason, *Josephus on the Pharisees*.

33 Encapsulated by Neusner, *Politics to Piety*, and Rivkin, *Hidden Revolution*.

importance, then, as an undoubtedly contemporary witness that mediated between the traditional Jewish and Christian texts. If it seems remarkable that his work was relatively ignored, while scholars undertook careful studies of Mark, Matthew, Luke-Acts or rabbinic literature on the Pharisees, that was a symptom of his image at the time as a bland data-source with no coherent point of view.

At the time, moreover, it was universally believed that Josephus either was a Pharisee or he postured as one in his later works—to align himself with the embryonic rabbinic movement at Yavneh. Thackeray's translation of *Vita* 12 in the Loeb edition was the lynch-pin of the impression that Josephus claimed to have investigated Judea's three "schools" and then chosen the Pharisees (emphasis added): "With him [Bannus] I lived for three years and, having accomplished my purpose, returned to the city. Being now in my nineteenth year I began to govern my life by the rules of the Pharisees (καὶ διατρίψας παρ' αὐτῷ ἔνιαυτοὺς τρεῖς καὶ τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν τελειώσας εἰς τὴν πόλιν ὑπέστρεφον. ἔννεακαιδέκατον δ' ἔτος ἔχων ἠρξάμην τε πολιτεύεσθαι τῇ Φαρισαίων αἰρέσει κατακολουθῶν)." This understanding of Josephus' language had also served as a lever for source-critical readings of his works. That is, if Josephus were a Pharisee, who knew and supported that prominent Judean group, he could not have written either the passages describing all three schools in Greek philosophical terms or those that portray Pharisees in hostile language. These must have been copied from a source that did not share Josephus' own views, such as Nicolaus of Damascus, or been added by imagined ghost-writers.³⁴

By the 1970s, the source-critical approach to Josephus' works had largely yielded to a biographical one (above): the main changes from *Bellum Judaicum* to *Antiquitates Judaicae* were thought to be due to shifting political allegiances, from Flavian propagandist to defender of Judean culture.³⁵ For understanding Josephus' Pharisees, this approach held that Josephus' *Bellum Judaicum* had little to say about the group because in pre-70 Judea Pharisees were a negligible presence, in which Josephus naturally had little interest. By the time of *Antiquitates-Vita* (93–94 CE), however, the small but influential group, after the collapse of the temple and its priesthood, were anchoring the new rabbinic movement. Therefore, Josephus gave them much more play in

34 E.g. Hölischer, "Josephus," 1936 (Josephus was a Pharisee; therefore his hostile portraits come from sources); Moore, "Fate and Free Will," 383–84 (portraits of philosophical schools "taken directly from Nicolaus"); D.R. Schwartz, "Josephus and Nicolaus," 158 (passages hostile to Pharisees can hardly come from Josephus, who claimed to be a Pharisee).

35 Laqueur, *Der jüdische Historiker*; Rasp, "Flavius Josephus," Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee*. Tuval, *Jerusalem Priest*, is a recent biographical interpretation of Josephus' works, though arguing for a transition from Palestinian to Diaspora Jew.

Antiquitates-Vita: from a combination of self-interest—hoping to gain favor with the movement’s leaders—and a wish to commend the group to rather nebulous “Roman authorities.”³⁶ Note the absence here of any clear conception of his audiences in Rome, or of how he reached them. The inconvenient hostility toward Pharisees in much of *Antiquitates-Vita* could also be explained as *internal* Pharisaic bickering, with Josephus complaining about his party colleagues. But his alleged claim to be a Pharisee (*Vita* 12) remained decisive for interpretation.

The compositional method attempted to understand Josephus’ descriptions of Pharisees first in terms of each work’s purposes, themes, and language. For example, his frequent observation that Pharisees were reputed to interpret the laws with accuracy (δοκέω with a cognate of ἀκριβεία: *BJ* 1.110; 2.162; *AJ* 17.41; *Vita* 191), which had usually been taken to indicate his approval of the group, turns out to be implicit criticism, as the stories following such claims confirm. Josephus asserts the mere appearance of accuracy in other contexts too (*BJ* 1.406; *AJ* 2.132; 20.43; *CA* 1.18, 67; 2.227). Like others who seem to, or have the reputation of being, careful, Pharisees do not *actually* interpret the laws accurately—that lies with the priests, whom Moses entrusted with legal interpretation—but they are popularly thought to do so. My contextual interpretation argued that Josephus’ descriptions of Pharisees as actors in Judean society are uniformly hostile, not in the sense that every phrase exudes venom, but in the sense that understanding their place in his narratives, and reading them as his first audiences would—taking cues from signpost statements and paying attention to the nuances of his language—create a coherently disparaging, distancing picture. He concedes that Pharisees are one of the three established schools, alongside Sadducees (whom he also dislikes) and Essenes (whom he adores), but this is not relevant to his portraits of the Pharisees’ (or Sadducees’) involvement in events, which contrast with his uniformly admiring accounts of Essenes. He repeatedly contrasts the Pharisees’ *reputation* for piety and scriptural expertise with their self-serving and even murderous behavior.

The aristocrat Josephus grudgingly concedes, however, that the common people love the Pharisees. He makes this point vividly in his accounts of Queen Alexandra Salome (in both *BJ* 1.110–114 and *AJ* 13.400–432), who temporarily succeeds—prolonging Hasmonean rule before its rapid collapse—*because* she restores the Pharisees’ principles of jurisprudence, decades after John

36 E.g., Smith, “Palestinian Judaism;” Neusner, *Politics to Piety*; Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee*, 140, 144–151; S. Schwartz, 170–208 (Josephus’ later works are generally sympathetic toward Pharisees-rabbis, though he allows contrary source material to stand).

Hyrchanus had abandoned them, allowing them control of internal affairs. This is how she wins over the populace, which her husband Alexander Janneus has alienated. Josephus presents this move, in some detail, as an origin-story. It explains how the present situation in Judea came to be. He drives the same point home when he describes the Sadducees (*AJ* 13.297–298; 18.15–17). The latter are often men of quality and standing, he says, but they are few and based in the aristocracy, and thus lack popular esteem. When they enter *polis* leadership, therefore, they must “yield to what the Pharisee says” (*AJ* 18.17). If they do not—like Alexander Janneus of old—the masses will not tolerate them.

This understanding of Josephus’ overall portraits of the group prompted a rethink of *Vita* 12, the place where he supposedly declares his Pharisaic allegiance. Closer examination casts doubt on Thackeray’s influential reading, to the effect that Josephus tried all the schools and opted for the Pharisees. His words do not quite say that. He reports that he tried all three schools and, being *unsatisfied* with any of them (*Vita* 10), went off to spend years with Bannus in the desert (*Vita* 11). *That* experience finally satisfied his yearning for a truly philosophical life: they lived on food that grew by itself, took only frigid baths in nature, and followed a harsh, toughening discipline. After that sublime period of youthful self-discovery, at age 19 Josephus returned to the *polis* to assume his adult responsibilities (εἰς τὴν πόλιν ὑπέστρεφον)—a shift that would be well understood by Roman audiences (*Vita* 12). This necessarily meant, for a young man of his status, beginning to participate in *polis* governance (ἡρξάμην τε πολιτεύεσθαι)—leading to the diplomatic mission he next describes in illustration (*V* 13–16). He adds in a subordinate clause that this engagement in Jerusalem’s leadership entailed compliance with the Pharisees (τῆ Φαρισαίων αἱρέσει κατακολουθῶν). The simplest interpretation of this remark, I argued, is not that he *became* a Pharisee or claimed to do so—any more than the Sadducees of *AJ* 18.17 became Pharisees when they entered public office. He has clearly explained that political life requires submission to the Pharisees’ ways. That is all he needs to be saying here. In accepting his adult civic responsibilities, he had to put aside true philosophy (not found in any of the schools) and defer to the Pharisees’ interpretation of the laws.

If this interpretation has merit, it has significant historical implications, not because we simply believe anything Josephus writes but because we differently understand what a historical hypothesis needs to explain. Instead of seeing Josephus as a Pharisee, and reading Pharisaism through him, or as one who lately wished to identify with the Pharisees, which would support a certain view of events at Yavneh and Rome’s involvement with them, we find an aristocrat looking down on Pharisees from lofty heights as a popular group. This (if valid) is a valuable perspective, to compare with those of early rabbinic texts

and the Gospels. Josephus also remarks that Sadducees were harsh in punishments, whereas Pharisees tended toward leniency (*AJ* 13.293–295; 20.199), and Josephus himself, though not a Sadducee, favors harshness (*AJ* 4.260–264; *CA* 2.214–215, 228, 234, 276–277).

If we now imagine the historical Pharisees in a way that would explain the evidence understood this way, we might imagine that they had a reputation for legal precision, as Josephus concedes (without agreeing), not because they were looking to catch people out—as Mark and Matthew mistakenly assume—but because Pharisees were devoted to helping ordinary folk live by the law of Moses. This also meant protecting them from the Pentateuch's prescriptions for capital and corporal punishments. Knowing the laws precisely, in the way of a good defense lawyer, enabled them to argue that the Torah's conditions for severe punishment had not been met—the very approach taken also in Mishnah *Sanhedrin*. Wealthy aristocrats, such as Josephus or Sadducees, might have favored less amelioration and a more direct application of the laws as written because they were far less likely to be convicted of ordinary crimes.³⁷ We might even reach the surprising conclusion that the Christian composition known as Luke-Acts, writing from a more bottom-up viewpoint and locating Jesus among the poor and powerless, which portrays Pharisees as Jesus' regular associates, treats them more favorably not only than Mark and Matthew, but also than the Judean Josephus from his elevated perch.³⁸

Here is a different kind of example of the stakes in interpretation before historical use. It is commonly held that Josephus' extensive Roman material in *AJ* 18–19, especially the speech of the consul Cn. Sentius Saturninus after the death of Gaius Caligula, was borrowed wholesale from Roman sources, perhaps in part to fill out the twenty-volume work with miscellaneous material.³⁹ Peter Wiseman regards much of *AJ* 19, for example, as “an authentic contemporary Roman view, a generation earlier than Tacitus, of the events that brought about the change” from an image of Rome as Senate and People to that of Senate, People, and Army.⁴⁰

By contrast, if compositional study showed that Josephus composed this part of the *Antiquities* in the same way he composed the rest, if he wrote the Roman consul's speech in *AJ* 19.166–184 as he wrote the scores of other speeches in his works, we would treat it as a different kind of evidence. Josephus was only

37 Since at least Roman times, the wealthy and well-placed have rarely been subject to criminal proceedings (cf. the 160,000+ prisoners sent from Britain to Australia as prisoners to 1868), though modern democracies work hard to show that the law is the same for all.

38 Cf. Mason, “Chief Priests.”

39 Thackeray, *Josephus, the Man and the Historian*, 68; Wiseman, *Death of Caligula*.

40 Wiseman, *Death of Caligula*, xiv.

four years old when Gaius was assassinated, and lived his pre-school years in Jerusalem. So he must have used sources when he came to write about Gaius' death, as indeed for nearly everything in his narratives. The question is whether he bodily preserved an earlier Roman account or whether he reworked his sources for his purposes. It turns out that the speech of Sentius, if we study its diction and rhetoric, includes a number of terms and themes that (1) are distinctive to Josephus and/or to *Antiquities* 17–19 and (2) continue his programmatic discussions of governance in Books 1 to 6. This is enough to suggest that we should regard this part of his work not as a primary source fortunately preserved intact from the 40s CE, but as the creation of an engaged participant in discussions about monarchy, tyranny, and succession (cf. *AJ* 1.14, 20) late in the Flavian period, under Domitian's tyranny, who reworks whatever sources he had for his purposes. It may be, for example, that some of his emphases in relation to tyranny and aristocracy were not spoken just this way in the 40s, but support his oblique, safe critique of monarchy in both Judea and Rome.

4 Josephus' Audience (Auditors, Impressions of Words, Tone, Assumptions, Irony)

The most tenaciously widespread impression of Josephus' *Bellum Judaicum*, since Laqueur and Thackeray in the 1920s, is that Josephus wrote both the work's Aramaic predecessor and then the Greek translation (more or less) as Flavian-Roman propaganda, for vaguely defined readerships that included leaders in the Parthian Empire. But consideration of the nature and constraints of first-century book publication drive home the need to think more carefully about the way in which Josephus brought his work to public notice. Obviously, he could not send his manuscript to a publisher with an international mailing list, whose marketers would then reach target audiences all over the known world. The means and mechanisms of ancient "publication" left him no choice but first to reach out to people in his immediate social environment in Rome.

The general point, which is well known in connection with other Roman literature,⁴¹ is confirmed by what Josephus himself says about the people who first received copies of his *Bellum Judaicum* (*CA* 1.51); by the prologue to *Bellum*, which reacts against the appalling accounts of the war that he is hearing in Rome, in the present tense—accounts written by regime-flatterers and bigots (*BJ* 1.1–8); by the prologue to *Antiquities*, which names Epaphroditus as the

41 E.g., Starr, "Circulation;" Salles, *Lire à Rome*; R. Ogilvie, *Roman Literature*; Fantham, *Roman Literary Culture*.

head of a local circle that has been leaning on Josephus to complete that work; and by several other considerations. For example, comparison of the introductory prospectus of *Bellum's* contents in *BJ* 1.22–29, which he wrote to stimulate audience interest, with the actual contents of *Bellum* shows that the prospectus highlights, for Roman audiences, what he thinks will sound familiar and not off-putting: famous Romans and their actions. This prospectus omits the main content of the later volumes, concerning Judean leaders and their actions (even his own brilliant career in Galilee), which he will introduce gradually after winning the audience's trust.

Second, he repeatedly begs off describing Roman affairs in detail on the ground that they are familiar to his audience and he must stick mainly to his Judean subject matter. For example, at *BJ* 4.492–496 on Nero's recent reign and the following civil war:

To speak of this—the way in which he abused the governing power, when he entrusted the commonwealth to those consummate contemptibles, Nymphidius and Tigellenus, and the contemptible types among his freedmen; how, when he had been plotted against by these men he was abandoned by all his guards and, after running off to the suburbs with four of the trusted freedmen, he did away with himself, and not much later those who had undone him paid the penalty; the war in Galatia [Gaul] as it wound up, and how Galba returned to Rome from Hispania after being proclaimed *imperator*; how, after he was treacherously murdered in the middle of the Roman forum upon being accused of mean-spiritedness by his soldiers, Otho was proclaimed *imperator*; the undoing of this man's campaign by the generals of Vitellius, and after that the disturbances under Vitellius and the clash around the Capitolium, as Antonius Primus and Mucianus brought an end to the internecine war by destroying Vitellius and the German legions—all these things I have declined to go through with precision, since that is burdensome to everyone and many Greeks as well as Romans have written them up. Nevertheless, both for the sake of connectedness of events, and so as not to break up the history, I have noted each point summarily.

He had done much the same in *BJ* 2.248–251, running through the reigns of Claudius and Nero, but declining to go into them, while assuring his Roman audience that he knows a great deal about these matters. He respects them too much, however, to elaborate on events that are so recent and familiar. He has the discipline to stay on point with the subject in which he is uniquely expert.

Notice also *BJ* 4.599, which mentions Vespasian's older brother and son in Rome, whom Vespasian's soldiers highlight as crucial for supporting the

Flavian cause, but without naming them. Had Josephus been writing about characters in Judea, he could not have done this. He regularly mentions Judean names, even when they go nowhere in the narrative. But his Flavian audience know very well who the brother and younger son of the current ruler are—Vespasian's tragic older brother Sabinus and the problem-teenager Domitian—and he need not state the obvious. He does casually name them 50 sections later because it is efficient to do so then, after they have become part of the story (*BJ* 4.645, 646), though still without the introductions he provides even for such prominent Judeans as high priests.

Once we begin to think of *Bellum Judaicum* as an effort to communicate with Greek-capable cultural elites in Rome, therefore also as a Roman history in that sense, it becomes difficult to sustain the traditional view of it as Flavian propaganda. To take just one example, if Josephus' passages concerning Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian were written to people who knew little of these men, at least parts of them could be read as moderately flattering: Josephus' emphasis on Vespasian's military competence, Titus' über-niceness, and the alleged trembling of the German tribes felt at 18-year-old Domitian's approach (*BJ* 7.85–88). For audiences well acquainted with the Flavians and their far more extravagant boasts in Rome, however, all elaborated by the very historians Josephus is challenging for their obsequiousness, his portraits of the family look very different, restrained, and even potentially critical. A well-informed audience in Flavian Rome would notice the details.

To begin with, the *Bellum Judaicum* undermines the central Flavian claim to have conquered a foreign people: a boast that justified their joint triumph and perhaps the extension of the *pomerium*, along with their claim to have brought such staggering foreign wealth to Rome that they could build the Flavian Amphitheatre from it. For Josephus, this is patent nonsense. The Judeans have been happy allies of Rome since their conquest by Pompey 130 years ago. The Romans know Judea, their elites, and their royal family very well. The recent war was not the Roman *conquest* of a foreign people, but a function of two *civil wars* intersecting, one in Rome and the other in Jerusalem.

Second, Josephus demolishes the Flavian claim that Tiberius Julius Alexander, Prefect of Egypt in 66 CE, independently endorsed Vespasian on 1 July 69, setting off a chain-reaction of later acclamations. Whereas Vespasian back-dated his *dies imperii* to 1 July on this basis (*Tacitus, Hist.* 2.79), Josephus relates that Vespasian was actually acclaimed by his own soldiers in Judea first. He then *wrote to Alexander* to solicit his support (*BJ* 4.616), a rather more pedestrian claim, analogous to the difference between being nominated for a prize and nominating oneself.

Many aspects of Josephus' portraits of Vespasian and Titus might look fishy to an audience competent enough to read between the lines. He is not overtly

disrespectful, of course, but his vignettes might raise questions to knowledgeable readers. Vespasian appears as a serial dissembler, who, although he is undoubtedly a tough character, seems unduly terrified of accepting acclamation, preferring a passive-aggressive simmer at Vitellius' accession, and then being afraid of winter travel to Rome—when it is nowhere near winter, and his Flavian forces will arrive there still in autumn (*BJ* 4.585–604, 619–650). His soldiers hail him as *imperator* with the expectation that he will lead them against Vitellius, but he suddenly becomes fascinated by Alexandria. When he wakes up to the importance of fighting in Italy, he sends Mucianus to do the dirty work while he waits in Alexandria for nearly a year, until the situation in Rome is settled. Josephus' Titus is a different sort altogether, a terribly kind and forgiving young man, personally brave but almost criminally gullible. As for Domitian, the story of German tribes trembling at his approach is funny to anyone who knows the stories circulating in Rome about the eighteen-year-old's arrogance, which infuriated his father, demanding a role he could not handle against the wishes of senior commanders, who had to keep him in check.

Investigating how Josephus reached his audiences, and where and who those audiences were, will affect our understanding of what Josephus meant to say and therefore how we use his work. If he were the regime mouthpiece of common imagination, we would use his *Bellum* in one way. If we find him pushing against regime claims, as a Judean statesman, we shall understand differently not only what his work says and means, but also the range of possibilities for foreign elites living in Rome. Josephus' situation might give rise to many more questions about how such people lived and interacted in the world capital.

5 Messages (Historiography, Devices, Speeches, Textual Irony)

The preceding discussion suggests what might be called audience-dependent irony. That is, Josephus does not say everything he means, but assumes his audience's knowledge (as all speakers and especially comedians do), for example of current Flavian propaganda, to make his points without the dangers of explication. A different kind of irony does not depend on audience knowledge because it is created in the text itself.

For example, *Vita* 22 claims that, since Josephus and his peers knew that they could not persuade those who had been radicalized by the abuses in Jerusalem to put aside their anger and arms, they *pretended* to go along with them. Josephus here creates a deliberate, consciously entered atmosphere of double games, which thereafter pervade the narrative. No one says what he

actually thinks. From John of Gischala and Justus of Tiberias to the delegation sent from Jerusalem and Josephus himself, everyone is desperately deploying rhetoric to achieve his aims by plausible-sounding dissimulation. This deceptive program was not so explicit in *Bellum Judaicum*, though it is clear enough there too: when Josephus finds himself preparing Galilee's defenses even though he knows that the Romans are unbeatable, when he asks Jerusalem's leaders to send forces he knows they do not have, and when he tries to flee Iotapata on the pretext (as he admits to the literary audience) that he is going to bring help or serve as a decoy.

Such pervasive deception, woven into the narrative fabric, would preclude historical uses that read such passages as transparent reflections of reality. For example, at *Vita* 65 Josephus relates that when he reached Tiberias, a town that he has just explained was riven by pro- and anti-Agrippa sentiment (*v* 31–43), he “began saying” that he had been sent by Jerusalem's leaders to demolish Agrippa's royal residence because it contained forbidden images. If this were mere reportage, one might well conclude that both Jerusalem's leaders and Josephus were radical champions of nationalist ideals, finally ready after centuries to throw off both imperial and Herodian rule.⁴² But is that the most plausible reading of the passage—leaving aside historical realities for a moment—in terms of Josephus' meaning? When we consider that he has framed *Vita* as a world of dissimulation, in which leaders must pretend to follow popular impulses, that no such order from Jerusalem has been mentioned (and it would be implausible in the context), that Josephus introduces his assertion outside Tiberias with the same verb (λέγω) that he used of his dissimulation program at *Vita* 22, and that he shows no interest in actually attacking the palace—but rather immediately leaves town, becomes furious when others act on his alleged program, and undertakes to return the plunder to King Agrippa (*v* 67–68, 130–131)—then his claim about the images looks like an intended trick to keep a restive populace onside, just as nearly every speech in *Vita* is a deception (cf. 141–142). If that is so, then Josephus is not accidentally disclosing an embarrassing historical truth here, but illustrating his clever efforts to win over the populace. This one temporarily backfired, so convincing was it.

More generally, scholars have argued that Josephus' apparent contradictions in *Bellum Judaicum* expose glaring, uncomfortable historical truths that he tried to conceal. For example, he claims that Ananus and the Jerusalem leaders

42 E.g., Luther, *Josephus und Justus*, 17–18; Laqueur, *Historiker*, 39–40; Drexler, “Untersuchungen,” 297–298; Goodman, *Ruling Class*, 218; Price, *Jerusalem under Siege*, 32; Vogel, “Bilderverbot.”

did not really want war, as he did not, and yet they all eagerly prepared for it (*BJ* 2.648–651; 4.320–324). Many scholars have concluded that these *actions* belie Josephus' *claims* and show that most of Jerusalem's leadership was truly committed to rebellion against Rome.⁴³ The principle here is not a bad one. The need to seek out incidental or "unintentional evidence," which contradicts a witness' main claims, is fundamental to critical investigation of the past.⁴⁴ When a defendant in a tax fraud case claims a lack of current funds, but incidentally mentions going to a concert, tickets for which are discovered to cost \$1,000, an alert investigator will seize on the inconsistency between statement and action. But to prove someone's real intentions, investigators need corroborative evidence. If we seem to find ourselves knee-deep in evidence that contradicts an author's aims, and that evidence looks programmatic, deliberate, and carefully crafted, we should ask whether we have adequately characterized the author's aims in the first place. For if it is abundant and deliberate, part of the crafted presentation, evidence obviously has no value as accidental.

The complexities that face all political leaders in times of crisis are well captured by Polybius' reactions to Rome's arrival in Achaëa in the mid-second century BCE. Polybius, one of Josephus' known inspirations, contrasts Philopoemen, who thought that Roman demands should be resisted as far as possible but accepted when resistance became dangerous, with Aristaenus, who thought it safer for a subject state to capitulate from the start, even anticipating the great power's demands. Polybius held that both men had the interests of their people at heart and both were virtuous, though Philopoemen was more deserving of admiration for the courage of his position. Much of Polybius' *Histories* is about the spectrum of responses to Rome's arrival in the East, embodied not least in the author's own career and multi-layered perspectives.⁴⁵ Josephus' contemporary Plutarch, who had read his Polybius and wrote a *Life of Philopoemen*, which notes that even the Romans admired that man for championing his people (*Phil.* 1.4: "the last of the Greeks"), also wrote an essay on statesmanship under Roman rule. This (*Precepts of Statecraft*) recognized the tightrope that provincial politicians had to walk: recognizing popular sentiment and seeming to embrace it while working quietly to steer a disgruntled populace to a safe harbor, and not attracting Roman legionary medicine for internal ills.⁴⁶ Josephus' portraits of Jerusalem's leaders

43 E.g., Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee*, 186; Goodman, *Ruling Class*, 20–21; Price, *Jerusalem under Siege*, 186.

44 See Bloch, *Historian's Craft*, 61, 64; Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 25, 265–282.

45 See e.g., Eckstein, *Moral Vision*, 194–236.

46 See Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*, and Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, for detailed discussion of the many nuanced Greek responses to Rome's *imperium* and national self-respect from Josephus' time onward.

and of his own position fit the conditions described by Polybius and Plutarch. Political leaders did not have the luxury of speaking their minds in earnest, but had to lead the populace and *gradually* bend them to their will, even if this required deception and stratagem.

I am not suggesting that Josephus' descriptions of Ananus and himself are accurate, or reflect just what they felt at the time. But they are plausible characterizations for Josephus to have formulated, and not as contradictory as they may seem to scholars in western democracies. If that complexity was precisely what Josephus was going for, again, we have no basis for extracting part of his description (they prepared defenses) as though it contradicted his purposes and was accidentally left as a clue to realities that he was trying to obscure. Again, the interpretation of Josephus' works as compositions, prepared in particular contexts and assuming certain audience knowledge and values, is a necessary preliminary to using them for historical reconstruction.

6 Conclusion: "The Meaning" of Josephus' Works

Meaning, it is trite to observe, is inexhaustible. People will always find new meaning in Josephus' works, as in any other text. This is normal and welcome. But we need criteria to distinguish more and less plausible interpretations. We shall only be able to argue for some kind of meaning if we can formulate the criteria it satisfies. An extreme reader-response position, for example, might hold that narratives offer material for any readers, at any time, to find their own meaning from impressions and purely private connections, as the viewers of a painting might see ever new things that the painter never imagined. Since no picture of historical reality hangs on any particular interpretation—a painter may hope to inspire infinitely varied responses—articulation of strong criteria may be undesirable. In the field that has become Josephus research, it sometimes appears that interpretative criteria are in this vein: each scholar reacts to Josephus' passages in a unique way and uses them for purposes that other scholars cannot follow.

In this chapter I have not tried to provide an objective description of Josephus research or what it should be—an impossible aim. I have rather proposed a reference point for discussions of the uses of Josephus later in this volume. Namely, I have argued that it is worth trying to interpret Josephus before using his work in reconstruction of lost events and conditions, and that it is reasonable to adopt shared criteria for such interpretation.

My proposed starting point is simple and conservative: that Josephus wrote to communicate with first-century audiences. If he did, then an obvious first step is to figure out what he wished to communicate. Although we shall never

recover that experience in anything like its original vitality and richness, it is a basic consideration if we ask *what* Josephus meant. The idea is not that his audiences' possible impressions could somehow decide what he meant, if we knew them. Rather, he provides abundant clues and cues for interpretation in his programmatic passages (prologues, summaries, narrative reflections), structural arrangements, recurring formulas and habits of diction, and persistent themes. But recognizing that he was speaking to real groups in space and time, we need also to take account of what audiences in Flavian Rome likely knew, as the shared extra-textual property that made communication possible.

The program is simple because each of us knows what it means to communicate in daily life. We attempt it every day, as each essay in this volume does. One proof that we care about effective communication is our annoyance when we are misunderstood, when the cues we thought we provided are missed and our decoders take a completely different sense from what we intended. Attempting communication is fundamental to being human. Although it is always imperfect—and leaving things partly obscure is also part of the game—we can and do communicate every day in homes, offices, and written texts. To *ask* about what someone intended to communicate is neither naive essentialism nor positivism. It is what we all do. Asking what Josephus meant to say to his first-century Roman audiences should likewise not cause distress, though claims to know the answer with confident comprehensiveness would be silly. We have no space here to work out the structures, themes, and communicative devices of Josephus' works. My purpose has been only to offer one angle on the importance of doing so.⁴⁷

In scholarship at times, but especially in the public world of the internet, Josephus continues to be “used and cited” for extraordinary ends. Typically, a casual reader sees a connection between something in Josephus and some external model or theory or text: in the Qumran Scrolls, the New Testament, or imagined Flavian propaganda. And then we are off to the races, as the author presents this parallel as a key to everything. I have argued that history cannot begin with such insight or epiphany, for which supporting evidence should then be assembled, but with an open question about the lost human past that generates an investigation. Any suspected epiphany is valuable, that is, only if it leads to the open investigation of some question, not as mere assertion of the alleged insight. But before we can usefully imagine answers to our question, we need some understanding of the evidence in its own context. We cannot blame casual readers for being impatient with the scholars' interpretation of

47 Even still this is rarely attempted. My efforts: for *Bellum Judaicum, History*, 60–137; for *Antiquitates-Vita, Life of Josephus*, xxi–xxvii.

Josephus. But scholars who want to use his work in historical explanation need at least a responsible notion of what he meant to say in his context (understanding will always be partial and provisional), before we move to hypothesizing the lost realities that would explain his surviving accounts.

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