

Josephus and the Bible

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Josephus opens his twenty-volume work on *Jewish Antiquities* in Greek with a strong assertion. He declares that he will set forth the entire ancient history of his people and the constitution of the state translated from the Hebrew writings themselves.¹ He follows this commitment a few lines later with a more striking statement. Josephus affirms quite explicitly that he promises neither to add nor to omit anything. The declaration is repeated in various forms several times.² The theme derives its force from the injunction that the Lord imposed upon the children of Israel, according to the Book of Deuteronomy, before they entered the promised land. He instructed them to obey his commands unstintingly, to add nothing to them, and to subtract nothing.³

The claim is consistent and categorical. Yet it is manifestly false. As is well known, Josephus himself did not adhere to his own precepts. Very far from it. Not only did he depart considerably from a mere reproduction of the biblical text, offering in general a paraphrase rather than a literal translation of the Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint. He also omitted numerous portions of the received text, dropping a number of somewhat embarrassing stories, such as that of Jacob's deception of Isaac in Genesis or the construction of the Golden Calf in Exodus; he further inserted several episodes not found in the Bible, like Moses' adventures in Ethiopia and his wedding to an Ethiopian princess.⁴

The deviations from the text raise two broad questions that this essay seeks to address. First, what does the discrepancy between Josephus' general statements and his practice tell us about his attitude toward the sanctity of

1 Josephus, *AJ* 1.5: μέλλει γὰρ περιέξειν ἅπασαν τὴν παρ' ἡμῖν ἀρχαιολογίαν καὶ τὴν διάταξιν τοῦ πολιτεύματος ἐκ τῶν Ἑβραϊκῶν μεθρημνησμένην γραμμμάτων. On the rendering of μεθρημνησμένην, see the lengthy note by Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 1–4, 3–4.

2 Josephus, *AJ* 1.17: ἐπηγγειλάμην οὐδὲν προσθεῖς οὐδ' αὖ παραλιπῶν. See also 10.218. Similar statements in 2.347; 4.196; 9.208; 14.1; 20.261; *CA* 1.42; 1.54. On one occasion Josephus does allow for the possibility of correction. In his retelling of the story of the Pentateuch's translation into Greek, he has the Alexandrian community declare that any additions or omissions should be corrected; *AJ* 12.109. But he does not apply this to his own rendition.

3 Deut 4:2; 12:32. A similar pronouncement at the end of Rev 22:18–19.

4 See the examples collected by Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 37–39; Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 1–4, 7.

the Scriptures? And second, is there consistent pattern or purpose behind Josephus' numerous variants?

Discomfort with the discordance has generated numerous efforts to get around the problem.⁵ Yet there is something singularly unsatisfying about them. Josephus' language about adding or subtracting nothing is pointed and firm. It does not readily allow for interpretations of loose phraseology, analogizing, or commonplace rhetoric. Josephus, after all, reiterated this position several times, and could hardly have taken it lightly.⁶

A central fact needs to be borne in mind from the outset. Rewritings of biblical material were nothing new. Indeed, they go back to the beginning. The Bible itself contains its own internal revisions. One need think only of the "Book of the Covenant" in Exodus as recast and expanded by Deuteronomy or the two books of Chronicles which offered their own retelling of material to be found in the books of Samuel—Kings.⁷

Even more noteworthy and telling, the appearance of Greek translations of the Hebrew text spawned a whole spate of altogether new versions of biblical tales, composed by Hellenistic Jews in Greek, but diverging, sometimes slightly, often quite drastically, from the Hebrew and Greek Bibles. A veritable industry of reframing and retelling biblical stories long preceded Josephus.

5 It has been suggested, for example, that Josephus, at least in his own mind, did not really alter the text but just applied new readings to it that left the meaning intact. Or by stressing the authorship of Moses Josephus could dodge any infringement of God's word by claiming the right to modify the words of a human being. Or else Josephus was simply uttering a rhetorical commonplace of historians justifying the reliability of their work. Or, on another theory, the historian hoped to get away with his sweeping statements, since readers, in the absence of bound manuscripts, indexes, or research assistants, let alone search engines, would simply be unable or unwilling to challenge his claims on exactitude. The efforts to resolve this glaring problem are thus many and occasionally ingenious. A valuable summary of opinions, with their principal proponents, may be found in Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 39–44; Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 1–4, 7–8; see also Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 252–256; Barclay, *Against Apion*, 31; Inowlocki, "Neither Adding nor Omitting," 50–51. A notable parallel to Josephus' statements occurs in Dionysius of Halicarnassus' claim that early Greek historians, in drawing on non-Greek sources of other peoples added nothing and subtracted nothing; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *On Thucydides* 5.331: μήτε προστιθέντες αὐταῖς τι μήτε ἀφαιροῦντες. See the commentary of Pritchett, *Dionysius of Halicarnassus*, 54. Cf. Attridge, *The Interpretation of Biblical History*, 59.

6 Inowlocki, "Neither Adding nor Omitting," 51–65, usefully cites parallel texts in other authors, indicating that ἀκριβεία can be understood in a flexible sense, pertaining to significance and meaning rather than exact rendering. But she goes too far in claiming that Josephus' references to "neither adding nor omitting anything" were not of great importance and that he saw himself from the outset as an interpreter rather than a translator.

7 Exod 20:22–23;33; Deut 12–26. Among innumerable discussions, see Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, esp. 231–277. On the Chronicler, see Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 380–403.

Numerous Jewish writers operated with tales familiar from the Scriptures, and then manipulated them at will. The phenomenon has spawned a raft of scholarly publications devoted to defining a presumed genre of literature, namely the “rewritten Bible.” And various proposals emerged to identify which works qualify under that rubric and which not. It has generated a vibrant scholarly debate.⁸ To subsume Josephus, however, under some such category (a strictly modern category), does nothing to illuminate the historian’s motivation or attitude in reshaping biblical narratives. It is preferable to avoid labels and pigeon-holes.

Efforts to find a consistent pattern or a driving motive to account for Josephus’ refashioning of biblical stories and characters have also occupied much scholarly attention. A lengthy list of researchers have sought the key to a coherent plan or a predominant purpose to explain the historian’s recasting of biblical figures and the stories in which they were enmeshed. Clues have most commonly been found in Josephus’ own career and aspirations or his apologetic aims in defending and promoting the achievements of his countrymen to a gentile readership who were otherwise critical or hostile. The impulse to discern a comprehensive aim and a systematic means toward it is understandably strong.⁹ Yet the diversity of Josephus’ own retellings complicates rather than establishes any firm formula.

8 The term was evidently coined by Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 95. Numerous efforts have been made to define a genre and to identify the texts that would fit into that concocted category. It goes without saying that no such pigeon-hole ever receives mention in antiquity. Among attempts to provide a frame and to assemble works that can be set within it, see, in general, the survey of Nickelsburg, “The Bible Rewritten,” 89–156; further, Harrington, “Palestinian Adaptations, 239–247; Alexander, “Retelling the Old Testament,” 99–121; Halpern-Amaru, “*Rewriting the Bible*,” 4–5; Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 7–8; Crawford, *Rewriting Scripture*, 2–15; Zahn, “Rewritten Scripture,” 323–336; Campbell “Rewritten Bible,” 49–81; Petersen, “Reflections,” 13–48. Bernstein, “Rewritten Bible,” 169–196, ostensibly questions the value of the category but struggles at length to define criteria, more narrow than loose, that would include some texts and exclude others. See also Zahn, “Genre and Rewritten Scripture,” 271–288, and Zahn, *Genres of Rewriting*, 56–73, with additional bibliography. She does reckon rewritten Bibles as a genre, but with a flexible and nuanced understanding. On the issue of genre in Hellenistic Jewish literature more broadly, see now Adams, *Greek Genres and Jewish Authors*, esp. 174–181 on rewritten scripture and 244–249 on Josephus’ *Antiquities*.

9 It is neither possible nor desirable to register the numerous treatments that have endeavored to offer an overall assessment of Josephus’ methods, goals, and unifying themes. Valuable surveys, among many, can be found in Holladay, *Theios Aner*, 67–79; Bilde, *Flavius Josephus*, 123–171; Mason, in Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 1–4, xiii–xvi; xxii–xxxv; Feldman, *Josephus’ Interpretation*, 214–217. The argument for apologetic aims recurs regularly in the literature: note, especially, Attridge, *Interpretation of Biblical History*, 43–66; Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome*, 114–69; Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 226–310.

The examples discussed here represent only a small sample. In a short paper, one cannot, of course, profess to survey the innumerable occasions on which Josephus departs from his model or to draw definitive conclusions from them. Limits of space prevent a detailed examination or a comprehensive bibliographical survey on each passage. This chapter offers instead an inquiry into select instances in the *Antiquities* that may provide some sense of the historian's approach (or approaches) and expectations and shed some light on his general attitude to the Scriptures.

Did Josephus have some persistent, objective guiding principle in his reframing of the original? And do his many modifications reflect on the authority or sacred character of the Scriptures?

1 Abraham in Egypt

A famous narrative in the Bible sets Abraham in a rather less than positive light. A famine took place in the land of Canaan, so Abraham took his wife Sara and went down to Egypt. But he suddenly had a very troubling concern. Sara was an exceedingly beautiful woman, so much so that Pharaoh was likely to want her for his own, and would thus probably kill her husband first, in order to wed Sara himself. So Abraham, foreseeing this, concocted a scheme whereby Sara would pretend to be his sister rather than his wife, and thus Abraham could escape death. This seemed to work like a charm for a time. Pharaoh was indeed smitten by Sara, did take her into the royal palace to live with him, and paid off Abraham, ostensibly her brother, with lavish gifts of sheep, oxen, camels, donkeys, and slaves. Abraham thus seemed to have gotten away with it, enjoyed wealth and luxury at the hands of Pharaoh—simply for the price of giving his wife away. Abraham may have been content with this, but the Lord was not. Divine punishment rained down from heaven in the form of mighty plagues afflicting Pharaoh and his people because the king had taken to himself the wife of another. Pharaoh at least got the point. He immediately returned Sara to Abraham, but not before rebuking the patriarch for telling him that she was his sister rather than his wife, and thus bringing pestilence and disaster upon Egypt. He then sent Abraham back to Canaan, with his wife, and with all his possessions.¹⁰

¹⁰ Gen 12:10–20.

Such is the narrative in the Book of Genesis.¹¹ Abraham certainly does not come off very well in the story. Josephus in general maintained fidelity to the biblical text, but certain changes suggest that he was not altogether comfortable with it. Abraham receives an added dimension of some significance in the historian's hands. His trip to Egypt was not simply to find food but to inquire of Egyptian priests about their religion, even to consider adoption of their beliefs if they could persuade him. The voyage was thus an intellectual as well as a practical one. Josephus acknowledges that Abraham pretended to be Sara's brother in order to preserve his own life, but, unlike the account in the Bible, he makes sure to say that God intervened right away, triggered an outbreak of timely pestilence and disease, and thwarted the criminal passion of the wicked king—just when he was about to lay hands on Sara. God therefore preserved her chastity. Also unlike the Bible, Josephus has Pharaoh provide Abraham with abundant wealth only after restoring Sara, and not as part of a bargain. And he elaborates further on Abraham's discussions with the priests, exhibiting the patriarch's superiority in their theological debates and his earning of their admiration through his intellectual prowess and learning. Indeed he proved responsible for introducing Egypt to the sciences of mathematics and astronomy.¹²

Josephus concludes his tale by saying that Abraham's reputation for virtue scaled even greater heights.¹³ It is hard to see much justification for that verdict in Genesis. Josephus plainly did not feel bound by that narrative. He conveyed the essence of the biblical version but took pains to leave the reader with a fuller picture of the patriarch and one that would deliver a most positive impression—however forced and unwarranted. The historian transformed the critical tale into an encomium. The dubious actions of Abraham gave way to laudation and elevation. The freedom that Josephus felt in revising the original is characteristic.

11 Variants on this version occur already in Genesis itself: 20:1–18 and 26:6–11 (with regard to Isaac).

12 Josephus was not the first to make Abraham a provider of knowledge to the Egyptians. Hellenistic Jewish writers like Artapanus and Ps.-Eupolemus ascribed to him the teaching of astrology to Egyptians; Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 9.17.8, 9.18.1. On the preservation of Sara's chastity, other writers too sought to give assurances; see Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 272–73.

13 Josephus, *AJ* 1.161–168. See 1.165: τὴν τε ἀρετὴν αὐτῷ καὶ τὴν ἐπ' αὐτῇ δόξαν ἐντετύθεν ἐπιφανεστέραν συνέβη γενέσθαι. Cf. the notes of Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 1–4, 60–64. On the depiction of Sara, an interesting study in itself, see most recently McDonald, *Searching for Sarah*, 40–46, 193–200.

2 Joseph

The Genesis narrative of Joseph portrays a complex and manifold personality, no mere one-dimensional man of virtue. The young Joseph, ambushed by his brothers, was hardly an innocent waif. His boastful recounting of dreams that forecast his own ascendancy not only angered his brothers but even troubled his father.¹⁴ When he went in search of his brothers on what seems little more than a spying mission, he flaunted the multi-colored coat—thus leading directly to his humiliation, being dumped in a pit and then sold to the Ishmaelites.¹⁵ Joseph, of course, was then taken to Egypt, where he nobly resisted the blandishments of Potiphar's wife, preserving his virtue and principles at the cost of imprisonment. When his reputation as interpreter of dreams brought him to Pharaoh's attention, his administrative talents put him in a position to run the country, and he took without hesitation the symbols of authority that elevated him to a rank second only to that of the king himself.¹⁶ The rediscovery of and reconciliation with his brothers forms a moving story. But one should not omit to note that Joseph calculatingly put them through some severe anxieties and emotional trials before revealing himself to them. Joseph's magnanimity obviously had its limits. Further, his stern and exacting management of grain allocation during the famine years brought all Egyptian land under the king's control and transformed the entire Egyptian peasantry into vassals of the crown.¹⁷ In short, Genesis supplies an intricate tale, a multifaceted personality, and rich material to be exploited by Hellenistic Jews. And exploit it they did.

The virtuous Joseph, scrubbed of all (or most) of his blemishes, appears in Josephus' lengthy reproduction of the biblical narrative.¹⁸ The brothers envied and hated him because of Jacob's favoritism, not because of any preening deeds by Joseph.¹⁹ Josephus pointedly omits Jacob's annoyance with Joseph for his excessive boasting, indeed even has him take pleasure in the recounting of his dream.²⁰ The historian embellishes liberally upon the Genesis text,

14 Gen 37:5–11.

15 Gen 37:3, 12–24.

16 Gen 39–44.

17 Gen 47:13–26.

18 For a detailed comparison between passages in the biblical narrative of Joseph and those in Josephus' adaptation, see Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 335–373, though he emphasizes too much the historian's impulse to make changes in accord with the presumed attitudes of his Roman readers.

19 Josephus, *AJ* 2.9–10. Cf. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 439.

20 Josephus, *AJ* 2.14.

a showpiece for his rhetorical training, as in the full-blown speech accorded to Reuben, based on just a few lines in the Bible.²¹ He freely expands upon the encounter with Potiphar's wife, not only stressing Joseph's chastity and restraint on the basis of his obligation to his patron, but supplying him with a noble speech that reminded her of her marriage vows and even offered her sage advice about how she could better command her household as a chaste mistress than as a compromised woman.²² The historian presents the exchange between Joseph and Potiphar's wife as a series of scenes with far more color and drama, including passionate avowals, tears, and ferocious anger, than the relatively brief and bland Genesis account. Joseph's steadfastness and composure stand out all the more.²³

The Genesis version of Joseph's deception of and double-dealing with his brothers, by contrast, is a full one and does not reflect well on the hero. The ordeals which Joseph inflicted upon his brothers and even his father Jacob stand out starkly. When they came to Egypt to purchase grain in order to relieve the famine in Canaan, as the famous tale has it, Joseph, now as chief minister of the Pharaoh, toyed with them to their deep discomfort and to his evident, even malicious, pleasure. The patriarch did eventually relent, reveal the truth, and declare reconciliation with his brothers, followed by tearful embraces all around and a happy ending.²⁴ But he had put them all through hell before disclosing the devious deceit. The author of the biblical text supplies no explicit reason for this elaborate and hurtful game. It may indeed be implied that Joseph was finally exacting vengeance for his brothers' dastardly deed of selling him off so long ago. If so, however, it means that Joseph nursed this bitter grievance for many years, finally enjoying revenge when his brothers were most vulnerable. That hardly commends the character of the perpetrator.

Josephus strained to clean up the picture. He supplies a motive for Joseph's dissembling, namely that he simply wished to test his brothers' true feelings

21 Josephus, *AJ* 2.20–28; cf. Gen 37:21–22. On Josephus' rewriting of the encounter of the brothers, see Franxman, *Genesis and the "Jewish Antiquities,"* 221–31.

22 Josephus, *AJ* 2.50–52: καὶ ὡς αὐτοῦ δεσπόσει μάλλον μείνασα καθαρὰ καὶ δεσποίνης ἐξουσίᾳ χρῆσεται πρὸς αὐτον, ἀλλ' οὐ συνεξαμαρτάνοντος αἰδοί, πολὺ δὲ κρείττον εἶναι θαρρεῖν ἐπὶ γινωσκομένοις τοῖς εὐ βεβιωμένοις ἢ ἐπὶ λανθανούσῃ κακοπραγίᾳ. On Josephus' presentation of Joseph as an exemplar of rationality, see Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation,* 346–351.

23 Josephus, *AJ* 2.41–59. Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation,* 369–372, rightly stresses the heightened coloration added by Josephus to the episodes involving Joseph and Potiphar's wife, although it need not follow, as is widely believed, that the historian was adapting the tale of Phaedra in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. On Josephus' expansion of the Potiphar's wife story, see also Franxman, *Genesis and the "Jewish Antiquities,"* 231–238.

24 Gen 45:1–15.

and qualities.²⁵ When Joseph extended the plot by surreptitiously placing the goblet in Benjamin's luggage, the historian gives as reason Joseph's wish to see whether the brothers would protect Benjamin in his travail or would abandon him.²⁶ There is no explicit suggestion or implication here that Joseph wished to make them squirm because they had once betrayed him.

The biblical account of Joseph's restructuring of Egyptian economy and society delivers a mixed message, and a somewhat troubling one. The famine had left most Egyptian farmers desperate to find means for survival. Joseph controlled the grain supply and distributed it to the needy in return first for cash, then for livestock. When both ran out and starvation became even more imminent, the farmers offered to cede their lands to Pharaoh and become his slaves in order to survive. Joseph embraced the idea, the peasantry became serfs, and the lands became crown property. He went further still and resettled people from place to place, thus separating them from their hereditary holdings, while still requiring them to pay a fifth of their produce annually to the king.²⁷ The author of this narrative makes no comment on the justification of this policy, but the effect is clearly a negative one.

Josephus followed the outline of the account but hesitated to embrace its implications, thus making some subtle but important changes. He acknowledges that all land was surrendered and became the property of Pharaoh, that people were moved from place to place, and even that the suffering shackled both bodies and minds.²⁸ But the historian moved swiftly to repair the damage. Once the Nile resumed its normal flow and the famine abated, he has Joseph restore the lands to their proprietors to cultivate in perpetuity, with payment of a fifth as a token tithe, much to the delight of the peasantry and a marked boost for the reputation of the royal minister.²⁹ Nothing of this in Genesis, and all remarks about servitude to the crown were notably expunged by Josephus.

25 Josephus, *AJ* 2.97. He further seeks to soften the negative implication of Joseph's temporary imprisonment of his brothers by suggesting that he simply wished to have more time to interrogate them; *AJ* 2.105; cf. Gen 42:17. Cf. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 461.

26 Josephus, *AJ* 2.125: ἐποίησεν δὲ ταῦτα διάπειραν βουλόμενος τῶν ἀδελφῶν λαβεῖν, πότερόν ποτε βοηθήσουσι τῷ Βενιαμὶν κλοπῆς ἀγομένῳ καὶ δοκοῦντι κινδυνεύειν, ἢ καταλιπόντες ὡς οὐδὲν αὐτοὶ κεκακουρηκότες ἀπίασι πρὸς τὸν πατέρα. Similarly, Philo, *Jos.* 232. On Josephus' narrative of the deception and revelation, see the discussion by Franxman, *Genesis and the Jewish Antiquities*, 249–267.

27 Gen 47:13–26.

28 Josephus, *AJ* 2.189–191.

29 Josephus, *AJ* 2.193: καὶ τούτῳ τῷ τρόπῳ τό τε ἀξίωμα παρὰ τοῖς Αἰγυπτίοις αὐτοῦ μείζον Ἰώσηπος ἀπεργάζεται καὶ πλείω γε τὴν εὐνοίαν τῷ βασιλεῖ παρ' αὐτῶν. Cf. Franxman, *Genesis and the Jewish Antiquities*, 279–281.

The biblical hero's repute is thus salvaged, and the whitewash predominates.³⁰ As in the case of Abraham, Josephus evidently felt a need to purge the patriarch of unseemly characteristics that might be inferred from the biblical narrative. With Joseph, however, the historian went to greater lengths, embellishing with rhetoric, enhancing scenes with dramatic flavor, inventing praiseworthy motives for questionable behavior, and casting dubious deeds in a more favorable light. Josephus kept ostensible fealty to the biblical account, while in fact applying his own more generous spin.

3 Moses in Ethiopia

Moses, of course, plays a very large role in the *Antiquities* of Josephus, as he does in much Hellenistic Jewish literature. But one tale stands out in remarkable relief, for it possesses no biblical precedent at all: Moses' military conquests in Ethiopia. A single possible prompt in the Scriptures exists: a remark in Numbers that Moses married an Ethiopian woman, a fact deplored by both Aaron and Miriam.³¹ It is unlikely in the extreme that this sole passing reference gave rise to Josephus' rather elaborate tale that had Moses as a successful general in Ethiopia whose triumphs induced an Ethiopian princess to fall in love with him and become his bride. Josephus drew on material well beyond the Bible and, to some degree on his own imagination.

The narrative in summary proceeds as follows. Ethiopian forces invaded Egypt and plundered Egyptian possessions. Egyptians retaliated with an invasion of their own but were badly beaten, fled back to Egypt, and thus provoked a much more devastating assault in which the Ethiopians overran the land, with little resistance, all the way to Memphis and the sea. The peoples of Egypt, in dire straits, resorted to oracles and divine prophecies, and received advice from God that they should have a Hebrew lead them into battle. Pharaoh consequently called upon his daughter to offer up Moses as general of the forces, which she consented to do, after rebuking the priests who had sought to have him killed as an enemy.³² Moses gladly took on the job, to the delight of both Hebrews and Egyptians, the one because they saw him as future leader of his people out of Egypt, the other because they expected that after driving out

30 Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 359–361, also correctly notes that Josephus plays down any divine influence in Joseph's admirable deeds. The hero's inner qualities are responsible.

31 Num 12:1.

32 Josephus, *AJ* 2.238–242.

the Ethiopians Moses would fall victim to Egyptian assassins.³³ Moses' expedition, however, proved strikingly successful. He chose a land route through treacherous territory and managed to dispose of the menace of flying snakes by shrewdly bringing along baskets of ibises who consumed them. There followed smashing victories over the Ethiopians, to the point that they faced enslavement or extirpation.³⁴ The daughter of the king who witnessed Moses' impressive ingenuity and his warrior exploits became hopelessly enamored of him and made him an offer of marriage. Moses readily agreed, but only on condition of surrender of the Ethiopian capital which he promised not to damage. The pact was made, and Moses led the Egyptians back to their homeland.³⁵

Josephus evidently did not blanch at inserting an adventure tale and romance that had no basis whatever in the Bible. Moses emerges as a military hero, a shrewd and commanding figure who routs the hitherto invincible Ethiopians and captures the heart of an Ethiopian princess to boot.

How much of this story is Josephus' creation and how much is adapted from elsewhere we cannot know. What we do know is that Josephus was not the first to convey a yarn about Moses and an Ethiopian expedition. A comparable but fundamentally different version appeared already in the quirky treatise of Artapanus. In his inventive rendition, Moses brought numerous salutary changes to Egyptian culture, religion, society, and administration. His innovations, however, and the fame which he had attained stirred the jealousy of the Pharaoh who conceived a nefarious scheme. He appointed Moses as commander of the army against the Ethiopian invaders but provided him only a ragtag group of forces, which (so he expected) should lead to failure and death. But Moses confounded the plan by winning every battle, founding a new city, and eventually even gaining the affection of the Ethiopians.³⁶

Much scholarly debate has been devoted to sorting out the relationship between these two fanciful tales. A variety of opinions have suggested either that Josephus employed Artapanus as a source or relied on an intermediary or that both authors drew upon a no longer extant text.³⁷ A definitive answer will always elude us. Clearly Josephus did not make up the story himself. Artapanus' version shows that diverse renderings of an expedition by Moses against Ethiopians had been floating about for some time. The significant differences between the accounts of Artapanus and Josephus render any effort

33 Josephus, *AJ* 2.243.

34 Josephus, *AJ* 2.244–248.

35 Josephus, *AJ* 2.252–253.

36 Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 9.27.4–10.

37 The bibliography is large. Useful compilations can be found in Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 1–4, 200–202; Römer, "Les guerres de Moïse," 169–193.

to see the one as dependent on the other or both dependent on a third source largely pointless.³⁸ One can dispute whether they were conveyed by written compositions or by oral transmission, whether they were based on folkloric traditions and popular memory or influenced by Jewish-Hellenistic historical literature or by writings that go back to the Persian period.³⁹ Nor does it help much to postulate apologetic motives that aimed to elevate Jewish virtues against the slanders of pagan critics and make the Jews more palatable to Roman readers.⁴⁰ Few pagan critics would be disabused by reading a fanciful tale of Moses' exploits.

It would be preferable to eschew the speculation. What matters is that Josephus chose to transmit or reconceive an engaging narrative that combined an adventure story of military cunning and heroism with a romantic tale and a plot arising out of court intrigue—none of which had the slightest connection with Scripture. The Israelite lawgiver emerges with added dimensions, those of vaunted warrior and novelistic hero. The entertainment value of this addition stands out. It calls attention to another dimension of Josephus' diversified reproduction of Israelite history. He evidently had no problem with inserting an altogether novel scenario into his narrative of biblical antiquity.

4 Jephthah and His Daughter

The wrenching tale of Jephthah and his daughter leaves a poignant and painful impact. It occupies a single chapter in the book of Judges but its resonance was meaningful and memorable. In the biblical account Jephthah had gained significant renown as a warrior but carried some genealogical baggage. He was son of a prostitute and when his father's legitimate sons grew to adulthood they drove him out of the household and denied him any rights of inheritance.

38 Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 269–279, usefully juxtaposes the two texts and underscores the discrepancies.

39 Rajak, "Moses in Ethiopia," 118–122, for example, sees a background of both Greek historical-ethnographic literature and oral traditions with folkloric elements. Runnalls, "Moses' Ethiopian Campaign," 149–150, calls attention to the possibility that the story may have circulated among Jewish mercenaries in the service of the Persians or the Ptolemies. For Römer, "Les guerres de Moïse," 188–190, both Artapanus and Josephus echo legends of the Egyptian hero and ruler Sesostris. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 1–4, 200–202, sagely refrains from adopting any of the hypotheses.

40 How far the *Antiquities* serve apologetic purposes as a whole cannot be explored here. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 226–310, makes an extensive case for Josephus as an apologetic historian. See also Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 361–362. But see the cogent reservations of Ribary, "Josephus' Rewritten Bible," 249–266, with bibliography.

Jephthah consequently dwelled in an unsavory location and surrounded himself with desperados. But at a time of dire need for the Israelites in Gilead, the nation facing a war with the Ammonites, it called upon Jephthah, with his martial reputation, to lead them into battle. Before engaging, however, he uttered a vow to God, promising that if he should gain victory, he would sacrifice to him as a burnt offering whatever emerges first from the door of his house after his victorious return. That vow proved to be fateful. Once Jephthah returned in triumph, the first to emerge from the door with timbrels and dances was his beloved virginal daughter and only child. The totally distraught Jephthah could do nothing more than tear his garments, berate himself for the foolish vow, and acknowledge that the pledge had to be honored. His daughter willingly submitted herself to the sacrifice as the vowed recompense to the Lord, asking only that she be allotted two months in the mountains in the company of her nubile companions to mourn the fact that she will die a virgin. Her father granted that last wish and, after two months, performed the fatal deed. The event would be commemorated annually through lamentations by the daughters of Israel.⁴¹

The biblical text provides almost no comment on this grim tale. Jephthah castigates himself for having made the vow once he sees his daughter emerge from the house, but does not question his obligation to fulfill the promise. And the daughter (the text never gives her name) accepts her fate unquestioningly. The issue of justice or righteousness does not arise. Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter was the straightforward carrying out of the warrior's oath, followed by an unquestioning acquiescence by the maiden. Whatever anguish readers may feel, the biblical author refrains from passing judgment.

Josephus' version of the story closely follows the biblical presentation. But not altogether. Some important differences emerge. In Josephus' narrative, Jephthah does not censure himself for having uttered the fatal vow but blames his daughter for undue haste in coming to meet him.⁴² And the historian allows himself a brief but pointed reflection that contrasts sharply with the biblical writer's reticence. He branded the deed as unlawful and displeasing to God, adding that Jephthah failed to take into account the possible consequences of his vow or to ponder how it would be perceived by those who learned of it.⁴³ Josephus, evidently dissatisfied with the absence of a moral verdict on Jephthah in the biblical story, felt compelled to exercise judgment.

41 Judg 11:1–40.

42 Josephus, *AJ* 5.264.

43 Josephus, *AJ* 5.265–266: τῆ δὲ τὸ συμβησόμενον οὐκ ἀηδῶς προσέπεσεν, ἐπὶ νίκῃ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ ἐλευθερίᾳ τῶν πολιτῶν τεθνηξομένη, παρεκάλεισε δὲ δύο μῆνας αὐτῆ παρασχόντα πρὸς τὸ

By reminding readers of the moral implications of the episode, Josephus injected a critical element that had been lacking in the received text.⁴⁴ It could inspire readers to ponder a deeper dimension in this troubling tale. The historian allowed himself a personal reflection not often to be found in his retellings.

5 Samson

The familiar tale of the imposing but ill-fated Samson stands among the Bible's most memorable narratives. The character of Samson as it appears in the scriptural account, however, is far from a fully admirable one. It thus presented a challenge for later retellings.

An annunciation scene heralded the birth of Samson, according to the Book of Judges. The coming child is to be a holy man, a Nazirite devoted to God from the womb. But, more than that, he is destined to take up the cause of the Israelites who are currently under the oppression of the Philistines.⁴⁵ So a glorious future was in store for Samson, both as a man of God and as a warrior. But the tale takes a number of disturbing twists and turns.

Samson's initial adventure involves neither his sacred mission as servant of the Lord nor his armed struggle with the Philistines. Instead, he became enamored of a Philistine woman, to the dismay of his parents. The strong-willed youth had his way, unaware that this was all part of God's plan to entangle the Israelites in a contest with their Philistine overlords.⁴⁶ The awesome strength of Samson, a super-hero in the mold of a Hercules, showed itself immediately in the trip to claim his woman. He tore apart a young lion with his bare hands. On a second trip, when the wedding took place, thirty companions were assigned to Samson. The Israelite, in a surprising turn, instead of fighting Philistines, now posed a riddle to his Philistine associates and challenged them to resolve it. Samson's posture, in other words, is not as brave warrior but as trickster hoping to show superiority over less clever Philistines. And the Israelite did

μετὰ τῶν πολιτῶν ἀποθρηνηῆσαι τὴν νεότητα, τότε ποιεῖν τὰ κατὰ τὴν εὐχὴν. συγχωρήσας δὲ τὰ κατὰ τὸν προειρημένον χρόνον μετὰ τοῦτον διελθόντα θύσας τὴν παιδα ὠλοκαύτωσεν, οὔτε νόμιμον οὔτε θεῶ κεχαρισμένην θυσίαν ἐπιτελών, μὴ διαβασανίσας τῷ λογισμῷ τὸ γενησόμενον οἶόν τε πραχθῆν δόξει τοῖς ἀκούσασι. See the note of Begg, *Judean Antiquities*, 5–7, 66.

44 On Josephus' concern with moral considerations in the *Antiquities*, see, in general, Attridge, *The Interpretation of Biblical History*, *passim*. With regard to Jephthah, however, Attridge focuses only on his miscalculation, not the moral issue; 113. See further Mason in Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 1–4, xxxii–xxxiv.

45 Judg 13:3–7.

46 Judg 14:1–4.

not play fair. His riddle involved the slaying of the lion, an event the Philistines had not witnessed and could hardly imagine. Samson, in short, relied neither on strength nor wit.⁴⁷ In fact, the Philistines outwit him by enlisting his new wife (through threats) to wheedle the answer of the riddle out of him. The outcome not only stirred Samson's wrath but provoked use of his superpowers in the most damaging fashion. He immediately slew thirty Philistines in order to wreak vengeance.⁴⁸ Samson hardly emerges as an estimable figure.

The fury of the super-hero only escalates from there. Samson failed to gain access to his wife and scorned the offer of a younger sister by her father. He subsequently exercised his revenge upon the larger community of Philistines. Somehow he miraculously captured three hundred foxes, tied them up tail to tail with a torch between each and set them onto the Philistines' grain fields, olive groves, and vineyards to spread fire throughout. The tit-for-tat then had the Philistines in turn burn up Samson's erstwhile wife and father-in-law, thus prompting still additional devastation by Samson who struck his enemies "hip on thigh." The escalation continued. The Judahites preferred to avoid further conflict by binding Samson and turning him over to the Philistines. Samson deceptively went along with the plan but at the moment of falling into Philistine hands, he burst the bonds, conveniently found the jawbone of an ass, and clubbed no fewer than a thousand Philistines to death with it.⁴⁹ The Lord, to be sure, supplied the hero with his super-powers, but Samson consistently applied them with ruthlessness, vengefulness, and excess.

The well-known climax carries through with the same themes. Samson succumbed once again to lust, this time with another Philistine, Delilah, who ultimately encompassed his demise. The strongman who had kept the root of his power under wraps was once more out-deceived.⁵⁰ Delilah snipped his locks when he slept, and Samson fell helpless into the hands of the Philistines who gouged out his eyes and reduced him to a mere grinder of mill in a prison. They then imposed a further and devastating humiliation by having him put on some sort of performance in the temple of their god Dagon, an exhibit of the superiority of their deity to that of the Israelites. The symbolism of that culminating divine contest came when God answered Samson's prayer, breathed new life into him (some hair had grown back), and Samson pulled down the pillars of Dagon's proud temple, crushing to death more people than he had ever slain in

47 Judg 14:5–14.

48 Judg 14:15–20.

49 Judg 15:1–17.

50 Judg 16:4–17.

his lifetime—including himself.⁵¹ The biblical story concludes with a notable pronouncement not to be overlooked. Samson's poignant appeal to the Lord for the final infusion of strength did not come as a means to demonstrate the predominance of his deity over that of the Philistines. That may have been God's intent. But Samson expressed it only as a personal desire to settle scores for the loss of his sight.⁵²

The will of the Lord was done. But his instrument was no saint. The exploits of the Herculean hero are decidedly less than gratifying. Samson is repeatedly motivated by lust rather than by principle. He engages in deception as well as brute force to gain his ends. But he is outfoxed by scheming women and by evil Philistines. And his slaughter of enemies reaches colossal proportions. Samson is more brawn than brains. Not exactly a model to be emulated.

The unsavory character of Samson presented a dilemma for Josephus. The awesome champion of the Israelites against the oppressive Philistines was, in fact, a flawed figure. In this case, the historian does not seek to eradicate the unattractive features of Samson's makeup. He takes a different approach. Josephus seems more concerned to minimize God's responsibility than to blot out Samson's blemishes. God, of course, plays a key role in the scriptural story at its outset, with regard to the annunciation of Samson's birth and the expectation of his devotion to the deity as a faithful Nazirite. Josephus follows this narrative, indeed elaborates upon it with emphasis on the beauty of Samson's mother and the jealousy of his father, thus to add some spice to the tale.⁵³

The Lord, in fact, remains an occasional presence in the biblical account, but hardly surfaces in Josephus. Samson's Herculean feat of single-handedly tearing apart a young and aggressive lion was due to divine inspiration, according to the Bible. No such inspiration in Josephus: Samson did it on his own.⁵⁴ A similar contrast holds in the recounting of Samson's wreaking of vengeance after his riddle was solved through the betrayal of his new wife. The biblical version has him infused by the spirit of the Lord; Josephus leaves God out of it.⁵⁵ The historian seems to shrink from saddling God with responsibility for Samson's excesses.⁵⁶

51 Judg 16:18–30.

52 Judg 16:28.

53 Judg 13; Josephus, *AJ* 5.276–285.

54 Judg 14:5–6; Josephus, *AJ* 5.287.

55 Judg 14:19; Josephus, *AJ* 5.294.

56 Josephus does have Samson disingenuously claim that his slaughter with the jawbone came from his own valor rather than the fact of divine aid; Josephus, *AJ* 5.301. But the reference is to God's infusion of strength, not to his support of the deed.

The final episodes of the drama underscore the absence of God. When Samson awoke after the sleep in which Delilah had cut off his hair, the biblical author pointedly notes that he failed to realize that God had abandoned him.⁵⁷ This implicates God in his fate. Josephus omits the notice altogether.⁵⁸ For him, God is not a player here, whether in presence or absence. Samson's own foolishness brought about his end. When the blinded Samson gropes for the pillars that will bring the temple of Dagon down upon himself and thousands of Philistines, he calls upon the Lord to revive his strength just one more time so that he could have his revenge upon those who had put out his eyes. So says the biblical narrative.⁵⁹ Nothing of this in Josephus. For him, Samson is led into a Greek-style symposium to be mocked and jeered by the guests, and he determined, without divine assistance, to avenge the mockery by removing the pillars and crushing his tormentors, himself with them.⁶⁰

The relative sidelining of God deserves emphasis. After echoing the scriptural remark that the Lord set the entire course of events in motion, Josephus largely keeps him off stage. Samson's deeds, his successes, and his missteps are fundamentally his own doing. And, while his awesome physical power provided him with spectacular achievements, his susceptibility to women, his wildly disproportionate acts of cruelty, his resort to deception, and his repeated mental lapses deeply tarnish his character. Whereas God determines the overall plot, Samson makes his own decisions, including the blunders, the ill-fated erotic entanglements, and the excessive butchery, none of which is imputed to the Lord.⁶¹ Josephus keeps God's interventions to a minimum, so as not to involve him too much with Samson's transgressions.⁶²

The transgressions, however, could not be gainsaid. Josephus maintained throughout his declared general policy of keeping to the text by recording all

57 Judg 16:21.

58 In Josephus' version, when Samson gives away his secret to Delilah, he adds that he is under God's protection so long as his hair remains untouched. But the historian points out that, notwithstanding God, Samson's fate was already sealed; Josephus, *AJ* 5:312; cf. 5:306; Begg, *Judean Antiquities*, 5–7, 78.

59 Judg 16:28.

60 Josephus, *AJ* 5:314–316. Cf. Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 485.

61 Whether Josephus presents the Samson story as a Greek tragedy, as suggested by Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 484; 489, is a more dubious proposition. There are few resemblances.

62 Roncace, "Another Portrait," 203–205, observes that Samson's superhuman powers had been the gift of God. But Josephus does not imply that the Lord sanctioned or guided the malevolent exercise of them.

the key episodes that disclose Samson's questionable qualities.⁶³ Yet he plainly had misgivings about the portrait delivered by the Scriptures. In a surprising turnabout at the conclusion of his narrative, the historian suddenly seeks to rescue Samson's reputation. His summary ascribes to the hero the features that compel admiration: bravery, strength, magnanimity at the end, and righteous wrath. Samson's flaws are here conveniently suppressed. Josephus has to admit Samson's vulnerability to feminine wiles, but he excuses it as a symptom of general human failing, quite minor when set next to his surpassing *arête*.⁶⁴

On the face of it, the Jewish historian reproduces the biblical account. But a combination of omission and addition give it a decidedly different flavor. He duly records Samson's character failings and misdeeds. This was no white-wash. But by reducing the involvement of God, he relieved the deity of responsibility for Samson's vices and offenses. Josephus' belated efforts to rescue the hero's reputation at the close soften the negative record but do not erase that dominant narrative. In the end they stand as an embarrassing anomaly. But the arresting shift at the conclusion underscores the historian's willingness to compromise the impact of the sacred tale by leaving readers with an altogether different impression of the hero's character and quality. The admirable features of the superhero stand side by side with the unpleasant ones, leaving an awkward composite image. In this re-conception Josephus complicates, even confounds, the Scriptures at the risk of leaving his readers at a loss.

6 The Judean Monarchy and Saul

The origins of monarchy in Judea are fraught with complexity and controversy. Did the Israelites need a king to lead them into battle against their enemies? Did they indeed want one or did they have a ruler foisted upon them? Was the outcome a salutary one, a mixed blessing, or a harbinger of evils to come?

63 That Josephus' narrative largely follows the biblical presentation is rightly noted by Roncace, "Another Portrait," 185–207, as against Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 461–489. But Roncace oddly fails to discuss the closing portion of the Josephus' account which is most glaringly at odds with the rest of his retelling.

64 Josephus, *AJ* 5.317: θαυμάζειν δὲ ἄξιον τῆς ἀρετῆς καὶ τῆς ἰσχύος καὶ τοῦ περὶ τὴν τελευτὴν μεγαλόφρονος τὸν ἄνδρα καὶ τῆς ὀργῆς τῆς μέχρι τοῦ τελευτᾶν πρὸς τοὺς πολεμίους. καὶ τὸ μὲν ὑπὸ γυναικὸς ἀλῶναι δεῖ τῆ φύσει τῶν ἀνθρώπων προσάπτειν ἤττονι ἀμαρτημάτων οὕση, μαρτυρεῖν δὲ ἐκείνῳ τὴν εἰς τὰ ἄλλα πάντα τῆς ἀρετῆς περιουσίαν. Begg, *Judean Antiquities*, 5–7, 79, surprisingly, does not comment on Josephus' striking reversal here. It is inadequate simply to ascribe it to Josephus' supposed penchant for balancing both good and bad qualities in the characters who appear in his works; so Mason in Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 1–4, xxxii.

The text of 1 Samuel contains the principal account of the Judeans' dilemma and their struggles over it. But that text itself is riddled with puzzling shifts and inconsistencies, most of them centered upon the problematic character of Saul. The fluctuations have prompted commentators to conceive of at least two separate strands woven together somewhat awkwardly to produce a composite version.⁶⁵ That may well be true. But the composite text as we have it or something like it was the basis for Josephus' subsequent rewriting and served as its jumping off point.

A brief summary of key passages in 1 Samuel on the installation of monarchy and the personage of Saul can supply the foundation for this discussion.

The sons of Samuel the prophet proved to be unfit to step into his place. The elders of Israel thus urged the seer to institute a new form of rule and to set a king over them, like other nations. Samuel sharply resisted the idea, pointing to the deleterious effects of such a change, especially the likelihood of tyrannical behavior that would reduce all to the status of slavery.⁶⁶ The narrative, however, immediately raises troubling ambiguities. Where does God stand on this? He ostensibly shares Samuel's deep discontent with the idea of a monarch, although he has his own personal motive. He ascribes the proposal to the Israelites' turning away from him and preferring a different ruler, another example of Israelite forsaking of the divinity who had made them the chosen people and looking instead to other gods.⁶⁷ The Lord, however, takes an unexpected stance. Instead of backing Samuel's efforts to discourage the establishment of monarchic governance, Yahweh instructs him to heed the wishes of the people, though warning them of the evils of the institution.⁶⁸ Why this apparent double-stance? Did God deliberately encourage monarchy for his wayward flock in order that they should suffer its injustices and then see the error of their ways? That question is left open. The people will have to endure an unsatisfactory king in the person of Saul, but the institution of kingship was evidently unaffected and lasted well beyond his disquieting reign. God has simply placed Samuel in the tortured situation of condemning monarchy while at the same time adhering to the popular will and creating a monarch.⁶⁹ The tension in the text is palpable, thus creating a challenge to readers and retellers.

65 See McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 12–23.

66 1 Sam 8:1–6, 11–18.

67 1 Sam 8:7.

68 1 Sam 8:7–9. Cf. the comments of McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 159–162.

69 1 Sam 8:19–22.

God does not disclaim responsibility for this major change in Judean governance and history. Nor for the appointee himself. The biblical text has him declare to Samuel that he will supply the man whom the seer should anoint as ruler over the nation.⁷⁰ And Samuel does indeed perform that function, while announcing that the anointment of Saul was the choice of Yahweh.⁷¹ Yet the very institution evidently remained a problematic matter. When Saul was questioned about his encounter with Samuel, he pointedly omitted any reference to the kingship.⁷² Samuel himself, however, despite initial misgivings, proclaimed the establishment of the monarchy and introduced the new monarch unequivocally as the choice of God, a decision duly hailed by the populace.⁷³

Samuel acknowledged that he adhered to the voice of the people who sought monarchy—but, even in his final days, he seemed well short of embracing the concept. The speech put in Samuel's mouth is notably equivocal. The seer reminds the Israelites, with a touch of sarcasm, that it was they who had insisted upon a king even though the Lord God was already their king, and he had granted their wish. Samuel exhorts them to follow their ruler as the agent of God, but not without adding that their wish was itself an act of wickedness.⁷⁴ This whole segment of the text indulges in irony, and increases perplexity. Whereas neither God nor Samuel ever declares explicit endorsement of monarchy as such, the institution evidently gained unspoken acknowledgment without explanation. The author or authors refrained from commenting and left the matter in a curious limbo.⁷⁵

The troubling ambiguity about monarchy is closely tied to a comparable ambiguity about the first monarch. The twists and turns engendered or suffered by Saul would require a separate treatment beyond the scope of this essay. The biblical text represents him as a tortured soul, sometimes admirable, often despicable, with frequent reversals of fortune and of character. They cannot be explored here. But one central question must be raised. Where is the hand of God in this drama?

70 1 Sam 9:15–17.

71 1 Sam 10:1, 24.

72 1 Sam 10:14–16. Josephus, *AJ* 6.63 ascribes Saul's hesitancy to self-control and moderation, ἐγκράτεια καὶ σωφροσύνη, rather than to any doubts about the institution.

73 1 Sam 10:23–25. Cf. 15:1, 17.

74 1 Sam 12:12–25.

75 When God lost confidence in Saul, he turned immediately to another choice for the kingship and orders for his anointing; 1 Sam 15:35; 16:12–13. Continuation of the monarchy was assumed and unquestioned.

Surprisingly, the divine entity takes a back seat through most of it. “The Lord’s word was rare in those days,” says the text.⁷⁶ He did emerge to summon Samuel to his post as successor to Eli and as prophet to the Lord, and spoke through him.⁷⁷ He could intervene in Israelite battles against the Philistines and to restore the Ark to its proper place. When the suggestion of installing monarchic rule arose, however, Yahweh did not take the initiative. The elders of Israel conceived the idea and pressed it upon Samuel, who sought God’s advice. The response that came was surprising and somewhat paradoxical. Yahweh instructed Samuel to follow the wishes of the people. Why? His reasoning lacks discernible logic. God reassures Samuel that the desire for a monarch is not a rejection of the seer but of God himself, an example among many of Israelite denial of the true God for false idols. This hardly explains Yahweh’s instruction to Samuel to abide by the people’s wishes while warning them of the despotic behavior that a king is likely to bring to his subjects.⁷⁸ Does he endorse monarchy as a means of punishing recalcitrant Israelites? Is this a begrudging acquiescence to popular outcry, a manipulation of the reluctant Samuel, and a trap for the faithless flock?

Samuel’s impassioned speech to the nation both reminds them that God has provided them with a king and rebukes them for having asked for one in the first place, claiming it to be an evil in the eyes of the Lord.⁷⁹ Just where does God stand? He has not previously and will not subsequently denounce monarchy itself as a wicked institution. Is Samuel representing divine sentiments or misconstruing them? There is more perplexity than direction in this account. And Yahweh does not come off well.

God himself expresses regret that he had ever bestowed the kingship on Saul, a most notable admission.⁸⁰ Was he acknowledging error? That would be a rather surprising confession. Samuel in fact insists that God never repents, only humans do so.⁸¹ On the face of it, that is a direct contradiction of God’s own expression of remorse, recorded a few lines earlier and again a few lines later. Bewilderment about the nature of God’s part in the tale only increases. He did at last determine upon the removal of Saul and the anointing of David.⁸² But the reasons for this rejection of Saul seem far less than obvious.

76 1 Sam 3:1.

77 1 Sam 3:4–21.

78 1 Sam 8:7–22.

79 1 Sam 12:13–17.

80 1 Sam 15:10–11, 35.

81 1 Sam 15:29. McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 268, maintains that this must be a late addition to the text. Be that as it may, the glaring inconsistency stood to confront subsequent readers.

82 1 Sam 16:1, 3, 12–14.

A premature sacrifice by Saul (for which he had good reason and for which he apologized) and the sparing of the Amalekite ruler would appear to be quite inadequate grounds, thus casting God in a rather dubious light.

The closing portions of 1 Samuel show Yahweh more as reactor than initiator. David, now chosen as the anointed one, had access to the Lord to whom he could appeal and who responded to his requests as patron for his conflicts against both the Philistines and Saul.⁸³ He even called upon God to serve as arbiter between him and Saul.⁸⁴ But no arbitration took place. And the Lord disappears from the scene for the rest of the tale through the death of Saul, apart from a single reply to a request of David regarding pursuit of an Amalekite raiding party.⁸⁵

The biblical text presented a severe challenge for readers and for any who wished to recast it. Was monarchy a blessing or a curse? The attitudes of both God and Samuel seem pliant and perplexing on both sides of the issue.

Josephus faced a formidable task in attempting to make sense of this convoluted story. He chose to follow closely the outline of the narrative but to expand upon it liberally, to give it more vividness, and to provide more range to its characters. The historian gave full play to his rhetorical skills by supplying lengthy speeches to the protagonists, and adds numerous details to the confrontations, thus making a richer tableau. The result is a notably longer text than the scriptural version itself.

The historian, interestingly enough, however, did not come to grips with the issue of monarchy as a desirable or undesirable mode of governance. He deviates little from the scriptural account in presenting the people's demands for a king, Samuel's reluctance to embrace the idea, God's authorization of the prophet's yielding on this score, and Samuel's warnings of the evils of one-man rule.⁸⁶ Writing, as he did, under the Roman Empire and as a beneficiary of the Flavian dynasty, Josephus would understandably hesitate to denounce the institution itself. But he adds a small item of no small significance. He observes that Samuel's hatred of kings stemmed from his deep commitment to aristocracy which he regarded as a divine and blessed form of government.⁸⁷

83 1 Sam 23:2–4, 10–13.

84 1 Sam 24:13–16.

85 1 Sam 30:6–8.

86 Josephus, *AJ* 6.35–44.

87 Josephus, *AJ* 6.36: ἤττητο γὰρ δεινῶς τῆς ἀριστοκρατίας ὡς θείας καὶ μακαρίους ποιούσης τοὺς χρωμένους αὐτῆς τῇ πολιτείᾳ. Josephus' references to aristocracy are generally favorable; *AJ* 4.223; 5.135; 6.84–85; 6.268. But his attitude is not always consistent. Cf. 11.111; 20.229; Attridge, *The Interpretation of Biblical History*, 139; Schwartz, "Josephus on Jewish Constitutions," 30–52; Spilsbury, *The Image of the Jew*, 161–171; Mason, in Feldman, *Judean*

Josephus thus transforms, without making an issue of it, the theological and Deuteronomistic matter of the people's rejection of God into a constitutional matter. By ascribing the view to Samuel (the Bible has none of this), the historian alludes to the political significance without taking a stand on it. Samuel, as the Scriptures have it, called another assembly, railed once more against the grievous drawbacks of kingship, and delivered the Lord's message that by choosing monarchy the people have cast aside God's own rulership—but monarchy they will have.⁸⁸ Josephus provides a faithful paraphrase of that text, and expresses no judgment.⁸⁹ The inner tension of the original is thus restated. And Josephus refrains from attempting to elucidate it. When Samuel anointed Saul for the second time to confirm his position, the biblical narrative has the prophet remind the populace that the installation of a king was their idea and a wicked one at that in the eyes of the Lord.⁹⁰ Josephus here again inserts his addition that the πολιτεία of the Hebrews had been transformed into a monarchy.⁹¹ While Samuel might deplore it, Josephus held back an explicit judgment. But a close reader could read between the lines. Josephus does observe that under Moses and Joshua, and subsequently under the Judges, the Israelites remained under aristocratic rule.⁹² He did not say but did not need to say that that was the preferable regime. But if any Roman reader should suspect an indirect questioning of monarchy, Josephus had deniability.

Once the fraught beginnings of monarchic rule were over, the issue disappears as if uncontroversial and unquestioned. Although Saul as first king is a most problematic character, there was no turning back on the institution. Josephus nurtured the notion (through Samuel) of a slide from admirable aristocracy to terrible tyranny, but the topic itself and the controversy disappeared with stunning swiftness. When Saul confronted the likelihood of displacement by David, the expectation of succession was already established fact.⁹³ It was assumed and confirmed by Samuel from the grave, although his initial stance had been fiercely hostile to one-man rule.⁹⁴ Josephus' general assessment of Saul in his concluding digression includes the striking statement that the king

Antiquities, 1–4, xxvi–xxvii, 414. The issue of aristocracy in Josephus was reassessed recently by Feeley “Josephus as a Political Philosopher.”

88 1 Sam 10:17.

89 Josephus, *AJ* 6.60–61, with the notes of Begg, *Judean Antiquities*, 5–7, 114–115.

90 1 Sam 12:12–24. Cf. Josephus, *AJ* 6.88–91.

91 Josephus, *AJ* 6.83: καὶ οὕτως ἡ τῶν Ἑβραίων πολιτεία εἰς βασιλείαν μετέπεσεν.

92 Josephus, *AJ* 6.84–85.

93 Josephus, *AJ* 6.291.

94 Josephus, *AJ* 6.335–336.

determined not to flee from his fate lest he disparage the dignity of kingship.⁹⁵ In the end, according to Josephus, Saul showed intense concern for his future reputation—something especially appropriate for kings.⁹⁶ The legitimacy of kingship had already moved beyond question. The transition from contested and reluctant installation to established system occurred as if in an instant and without apparent resistance—or at least without notice either by the biblical writer or by the Jewish historian.

Josephus' recounting and elaborations upon the life of Saul cannot here be explored in detail.⁹⁷ But two notable excursions in the text prompted by that life give access to Josephus' own reflections on larger matters.

Saul's act of most horrendous nature, the murder of the High Priest of Nob simply for hosting David, followed by the massacre of his whole family, then all the inhabitants of the town, is duly registered by Josephus and condemned by him in no uncertain terms.⁹⁸ The deed did, however, prompt general thoughts that were not drawn from the Scriptures. Josephus presents Saul as exemplar of a deep character flaw fundamental to humanity itself. In the historian's jaundiced view, all men exhibit gentleness, moderation, and righteousness when they lack power. But once they are in a position of untrammelled authority and sovereignty, they strip off the mask, abandon their false benevolence, and give free reign to irrationality, malevolence, and cruelty, of which a prime instance is Saul's calamitous vengefulness at Nob.⁹⁹ Josephus concludes his devastating digression there and makes no more of it. He returns directly to his narrative with close adherence to the scriptural story. But the excursus leaves an ineradicable impression. Josephus trod on treacherous ground here. The idea that absolute power brings out the darkest traits of human character could reverberate with those subject to the rulers of the Roman Empire. Josephus gave voice to but swiftly dropped that line of reasoning—a prudent move. But he had already dropped a suggestive hint that owed nothing to the Bible.

A surprising turn occurred somewhat later in Josephus' text. He provided yet another digression, inserted just prior to the culminating scene of Saul's death, without any scriptural authority, in order to leave his own stamp on the meaning and significance of Saul's life and deeds.¹⁰⁰ It comes quite unexpectedly

95 Josephus, *AJ* 6.344: καθυβρίσαι δὲ τὸ τῆς βασιλείας ἀξίωμα.

96 Josephus, *AJ* 6.349; cf. 6.343.

97 On Josephus' portrait of Saul, see Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 509–536, although his emphasis on the praiseworthy qualities of Saul is one-sided and exaggerated. For a more judicious literary analysis, see Avioz, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 23–56.

98 Josephus, *AJ* 6.255–262.

99 Josephus, *AJ* 6.262–268.

100 Josephus, *AJ* 6.343–350.

and seems to have a life of its own. Unlike the earlier excursus which deployed Saul as archetype of inner human wickedness, this one draws out his worthy traits that could inspire those who would emulate them to deeds of virtue and renown. The historian points to Saul's courage and perseverance at the end of his life: he faced his fate unflinchingly, rejected the idea of clinging to life and besmirching the dignity of kingship; he would go down fighting and provide those left behind with a model of bravery that would earn him eternal renown. Josephus' lofty encomium makes Saul the very epitome of righteousness, courage, and wisdom.¹⁰¹ He reiterates the point more than once in this section, holding up Saul's determination and valor at the end as the true means for all, but especially for kings, to leave a lasting lesson for posterity.¹⁰² This is a quite remarkable, even startling, parenthesis in the text. Coming shortly before the description of Saul's suicide, which Josephus commends (although he notoriously shunned that choice for himself), it is particularly striking. Is this indeed a model to be emulated? And how does one reconcile the powerful praise of Saul's virtues with the rest of the narrative that suggests nothing of the sort. Josephus seems almost embarrassed and sheepish about the excursus. In its concluding lines, he claims to have much more to say about Saul's fortitude but forbears to continue lest he appear excessive and tasteless in his panegyric.¹⁰³

The sharply different, even mutually contradictory, judgments delivered in Josephus' two digressions on Saul, the one epitomizing internal immorality and the other exemplary virtue, resist reconciliation.¹⁰⁴ Josephus appears to have had an attack of bad conscience at the end and thus labored to provide a different side of Saul. It did not bring coherence to the convoluted portrait stemming from the Scriptures, indeed only added to the incoherence. The suicide of Saul plainly resonated with Josephus' own personal experience. He felt an urgency to confront it and its reverberations. But he left the discordance with his earlier remarks unaddressed and unresolved. Readers would have to put the pieces together themselves.

101 Josephus, *AJ* 6.346: δίκαιος και ἀνδρεῖος και σώφρων.

102 Josephus, *AJ* 6.349–350. On Josephus' attitude toward self-killing more generally, see van Henten, "Noble Death," 203–207.

103 Josephus, *AJ* 6.350: ἔτι τούτων πλείω περι Σαούλου και τῆς εὐψυχίας λέγειν ἠδυνάμην, ὅλην ἡμῖν χορηγησάσης τῆς ὑποθέσεως, ἀλλ' ἵνα μὴ φανώμεν ἀπειροκάλως αὐτοῦ χρῆσθαι τοῖς ἐπαίνοις, ἐπάνειμι πάλιν ἀφ' ὧν εἰς τούτους ἐξέβην.

104 Avioz, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 54, suggests that Josephus included the encomium simply because it was a literary convention or because he wished to soften the negative portrait of Saul and the institution of monarchy. That does not account for his willingness to let the blatant inconsistency stand.

Josephus leaves the role of God as slippery and ambivalent as the biblical account. The Bible made him a somewhat secondary character. The tale revolved around Samuel, Saul, and David, with God for the most part letting it play out on its own. Josephus clings close to the Scriptures, but adds some subtle supplements that suggest a slightly different perspective on the deity.

The tortured logic of God's authorization of monarchy out of pique because the people sought it, rather than being content with God's own dominion over them, is essentially repeated without comment by Josephus.¹⁰⁵ But he nuances the original by having Samuel explain the divine intention. Samuel infers that the Lord is putting his people through a trial. The harsh brutality of a king will drive them to implore God for succor, but he will not heed their prayers, thus to teach them a lesson for seeking a monarchy in the first place.¹⁰⁶ This spells out what was unexpressed in the original and endeavors to account for the divine motivation.¹⁰⁷ In a subsequent popular assembly summoned by Samuel, the prophet again voices Yahweh's will as punishing the Israelites for having preferred a ruler other than himself.¹⁰⁸ The Deuteronomistic character of the story stands forth: an affront to God followed by divine retaliation. God's will is expressed through his prophet and represented by his choice of king. But the agents of the Lord play the principal roles. Yahweh is appealed to, spoken for, even disobeyed, but more detached than engaged. His order for the extermination of the Amalekites, however, does draw Josephus' attention. The Lord's fury at Saul seems excessive and unjustified in the biblical narrative. Josephus felt the need to give some accounting for it. He ascribes it to God's unrelenting hatred of all Amalekites, the people who ambushed the Hebrews on the Exodus.¹⁰⁹ Indeed Josephus adds to the biblical text an express contrast between the unremittingly irascible Yahweh and Saul who showed at least a modicum of compassion.¹¹⁰ That contrast forecast Saul's demise. His sparing of the Amalekite ruler found God quite unforgiving and bent on retribution.¹¹¹ The Lord is not especially laudable in the biblical version. Josephus' additions

105 Josephus, *AJ* 6.38–39.

106 Josephus, *AJ* 6.42: ὁ δ' οὐ προσδέξεται τὰς δεήσεις, ἀλλὰ παραπέμψας ἑάσει δίκην ὑποσχεῖν ὑμᾶς τῆς αὐτῶν κακοβουλίας. See Begg, *Judean Antiquities*, 5–7, 107–108.

107 Cf. 1 Sam 8:4–22.

108 Josephus, *AJ* 6.60–61.

109 Josephus, *AJ* 6.138.

110 Josephus, *AJ* 6.137: οὐκέτι τοῦτο ποιῶν κατὰ βούλησιν τοῦ θεοῦ, πάθει δὲ νικῶμενος ἰδίῳ καὶ χαριζόμενος ἀκαίρως περὶ ὧν οὐκ εἶχεν ἀκίνδυνον ἐξουσίαν οἴκτω; 142–151. On Saul and the Amalekites, see Avioz, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 37–39.

111 Josephus, *AJ* 6.142, 150, 335–36, 378.

make him even less so. But the historian does endeavor to account for Yahweh's actions which the biblical author had evidently reckoned as self-evident.

Josephus, on the whole, faithfully reproduced the tangled tale of Samuel and Saul in the web of an inscrutable God. But although he did not disentangle it, he exercised to some advantage the historian's craft. He ventured to pose the problematic issue of monarchic rule as both a theological and a political one. His insertion or elaboration of speeches in the tradition of classical historiography, his commitment to find some rationality in seemingly irrational behavior, and his pauses to reflect upon the effects of character upon events and as exempla for the future provide historical perspective that far exceeded mere reproduction of a narrative. Josephus did not tie up the loose ends. But his new version, prompted by historical considerations and broader issues, added ingredients that could provoke serious rethinking and reflection well beyond the basic story.

7 Conclusion

These examples do not, of course, tell the whole story. The variety of approaches to the biblical material even in these few samples, however, indicates that Josephus operated without a fixed agenda or goal that governed his rewritings. He followed no firm pattern or repeated scheme in recasting the tales. The stories and characters themselves prompted a range of reactions from the historian. For the most part, he retained the framework of the received story, but he could shift the emphasis, reimagine a character, drop or soften unwelcome actions, and inject his own inferences or judgments to leave a quite different impression depending upon the character or message of the biblical segment that he was treating. He eschewed any consistent formula that might determine his disposition.

Josephus could rewrite a story to massage the reputations of Abraham and Joseph, to add a military and a romantic dimension to the lawgiver, to implant moral considerations into the tale of Jephthah, to complicate the harsh portrait of Samson, and to tackle (though not resolve) the delicate problem of the relation between monarchy and the deity. It would be reductive and misguided to force the historian's multiple, miscellaneous, and disparate re-imaginings of biblical material into some neat schema that guided his history.

What inferences follow for the broader question of attitude toward the sanctity of tradition? For Josephus, Scripture clearly allowed for flexibility and manipulation. But there is no reason to see his additions, omissions, or variations as constituting irreverence or a cavalier attitude toward biblical

authority. What these re-writings confirm is that scriptural sanctity did not require consistent or precise replication. The adaptation of Jewish legend through different approaches and angles had been an integral part of Jewish culture almost from the start. And Josephus' *Antiquities* falls well within that tradition. Nothing suggests that new versions of scriptural material sought to supersede the biblical account, to substitute for it, or to displace it.¹¹² It did not, in any way, compromise the integrity, let alone the holiness, of the Bible to provide alternative ways of presenting a narrative or a character. In fact, I would urge, the reverse holds. The variants, perhaps paradoxically, only served to validate the original, even occasionally to elevate it. Indeed they generally took for granted that the readership knew the original. In this way readers would best appreciate the divergences from and the twists applied to the antecedent text, the expansions and the nuances, even the altogether new renderings that would provide a fresh angle on the earlier text. Far from weakening the force of the original, they called attention to its authority.¹¹³ Variants on scriptural material only reinforced the importance of its inspiration. The relationship was a reciprocal one. The scriptures stimulated novel variations and the variations validated the source of stimulation.

The claims of an exact duplication of the original issued by Josephus about his own rendition need to be understood and, I believe, were understood as statements of symbolic significance. Readers of Josephus who were familiar with the Hebrew Bible and its diverse reproductions would not have been misled by his pronouncements. The rewriting of biblical tales maintained, even strengthened, their authority, but also found room for thoughtful, provocative, reflective, and even inventive variations on their rich themes and unforgettable characters.

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¹¹² So, rightly, Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 44. Petersen, "Reflections," 33–35 endeavors to make the case that *Jubilees* at least did present itself as superseding its scriptural predecessors.

¹¹³ Cf. Brooke, "Between Authority and Canon," 96.

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