Josephus’s Retelling of the Patriarchs’ Polygyny in a Greco-Roman Context

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Abstract

This study explores how Josephus presents the plural marriages of the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob in Antiquities of the Jews. It examines three aspects of Abraham and Jacob’s family relationships: polygyny, sexual relationships with slave women, and the status of children born to slaves. The article demonstrates that Josephus has modified the depiction of these relationships as found in Genesis, and argues that he is apologetically shaping these stories in order to better appeal to the cultural values of his Greco-Roman audience.

Keywords

Josephus – Antiquities of the Jews – biblical interpretation – patriarchs – polygamy

Many scholars have explored how Josephus’s Jewish Antiquities adapts biblical narrative for his Greco-Roman audiences. In this article, I will contribute to that broader exploration by focusing on a theme that has received insufficient attention: how Josephus re-presents the patriarchs’ polygynous marriages.

1 A few monographs on this topic include Attridge, Interpretation of Biblical History; Franxman, Genesis and the “Jewish Antiquities”; Feldman, Studies in Josephus’ Rewritten Bible; Feldman, Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible; and Avioz, Legal Exegesis of Scripture. See also Spilsbury, “Josephus and the Bible”; Spilsbury, “Reading the Bible in Rome”; and Begg, “Genesis in Josephus.”

2 Many studies of Josephus do not discuss his portrayal of polygyny despite the immediate relevance. For example, Franxman’s Genesis and the “Jewish Antiquities” compares many
Discussions about Josephus and polygyny typically focus on his descriptions of the near-contemporary polygyny of King Herod, who “lived with nine wives” (συνῴκουν ἐννέα γυναῖκες, Ant. 17.19). Josephus calls this a “Jewish ancestral custom” (πατρίως Ἰουδαίοις, War 1.477; see also Ant. 17.14), an explanation that fits into Josephus’s larger pattern of appealing to the antiquity of Jewish practices in order to gain the respect of Hellenistic readers. Some have read Josephus’s description of polygyny as defensive, anticipating that readers will look down on the practice, but Josephus’s posturing in these passages is not entirely clear.

Josephus’s framing of Jewish polygyny can be better appreciated through an analysis of how he treats the polygynous relationships of the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob. Josephus’s treatment of polygyny in these narratives has received little attention, perhaps because he does not address the subject directly, as he does with Herod. However, I argue that patterns in Josephus’s handling of these stories demonstrate that Josephus recognized how foreign Israelite polygyny would look to his Greco-Roman audiences, and his changes to the stories have the effect of making Abraham and Jacob’s relationships align better with Greco-Roman marital norms. The plural marriages in these stories are also inextricably linked to their presentation of sexual relations with slave women, and I argue that Josephus has modified this aspect of the patriarchs’ marriages as well. I will begin with (1) a survey of the practice of polygyny in ancient Israel and in Greco-Roman culture, followed by an analysis of how Josephus has modified the presentation of polygyny in the Genesis narratives. I will then address the related issues of (2) how sexual relationships with slave women were perceived in ancient Israel and Greco-Roman culture and how Josephus navigated the disparity between the two, followed by (3) how Josephus navigated the disparity between how the children born to slave women were perceived. I will conclude with (4) a synopsis of how Josephus has addressed these issues in a way that would improve his Greco-Roman readership’s perception of Abraham, Jacob, and their wives and children – the progenitors of the Jewish people.

4 Gafni, “Institution of Marriage,” 21, suggests that Josephus was forced to explain Herod’s polygyny because Josephus knew the monogamous Roman Empire would look down on the practice. Conversely, Loader, Philo, Josephus, and the Testaments, 344, reads Josephus as being “comfortable with the idea of polygyny.”
Polygyny

1.1 Polygyny in Ancient Israel and in Greco-Roman Culture

In many ancient Near Eastern cultures (including at least Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria, Ugarit, and Mari), men could practice polygyny – the marriage of a man to two or more women simultaneously. That this type of marriage was practiced in ancient Israel is thus unremarkable. The Hebrew Bible records the names of over two dozen Israelite men who were polygynists, including Gideon, Elkanah, Saul, David, and Solomon. Some scholars have observed that many of the polygynists in biblical narrative were either rich or royal, concluding that polygyny was therefore almost the exclusive privilege of kings. Others have pointed out, however, that the historical books “record little about any commoner, or the marriage of any commoner,” meaning that no matter how prevalent polygyny was among non-royals, we would not expect to see it show up in the Bible. In fact, ethnographic studies show that some modern families form polygynous unions precisely because they are poor and want to pool resources, suggesting that poor ancient Israelites may have seen similar economic opportunities.

A handful of biblical laws also assume the reality of the practice. From the Covenant Code, Exod 21:7–11 establishes the rights of a slave girl (אמה) who enters a marital relationship with her male owner, rights which would be protected even if the man “marries another (woman)” (אחרת יקח־לו, v. 10). From the Holiness Code, Lev 18:18 instructs, “You must not marry a woman as a rival to her sister, to uncover her nakedness, as long as she lives” (ואשה).
From the Deuteronomistic legal corpus, Deut 17:17 mandates that the Israelite king “must not multiply wives for himself” (ללא ירבה נשים) and additionally prohibits the multiplication of gold and silver, suggesting that the intent is not a complete prohibition but rather a check on excess. Deuteronomy 21:15–17 legislates situations in which “a man has two wives, the one loved and the other hated” (היהי ליהושٵ שב נשים), by protecting the inheritance of the “hated” wife’s children against discrimination on the father’s part.12

Extra-biblical evidence demonstrates that polygynous marriages continued to be a part of Jewish culture up through Josephus’s first-century setting.13 Among the fifth-century BCE papyri from the Jewish colony at Elephantine, two of the seven marriage contracts prohibit husbands from marrying a second wife – a proviso that clearly implies that this might be a possibility.14 In the late first century BCE, King Herod was married to more than one wife.15 While Herod is hardly representative of everyday Jews, legal documents discovered at Nahal Hever have revealed the story of Babatha, an early-second century CE Jewish woman who married a man named Judah, who was already married to a wife named Miriam.16 This “was an absolutely normal case of polygyny between Jews of moderate means,”17 providing clear evidence that the practice could exist “in a fairly remote rural area … far removed from [the situation] of the Herods and their ilk.”18

11 לצרר, which I have translated “as a rival,” is an infinitive construct. HALOT lists this as the sole attestation of a denominative verb (HALOT, s.v. “צרר”) from the noun צרה (HALOT, s.v. “צרה”), meaning – tellingly – either “concubine, second wife” (see 1 Sam 1:6, Sir 37:11) or “enmity” (see Pss 54:9, 138:7, 143:11). The masculine form means “enemy” (HALOT, s.v. “צר”).

12 Many scholars have understood Deut 21:15–17 to limit the father’s ability to favor a younger son over the firstborn in terms of birthright inheritance. In contrast, Wells, “Hated Wife,” persuasively argues that the text continues to affirm fathers’ right to choose their heir but intercedes in the scenario that the husband has, without adequate legal grounds, demoted (“hated”) one of his wives from her previous position. Had the husband not taken this first arbitrary action, he would have retained the right to choose his own heir.

13 For a survey of Jewish polygyny from biblical times through the Middle Ages, see Goldfeder, “Story of Jewish Polygamy.”


16 See Esler, Babatha’s Orchard.

17 Satlow, Jewish Marriage in Antiquity, 189.

18 Collins, “Marriage, Divorce, and Family,” 122.
While polygyny was traditional and non-controversial in Jewish society and the broader ancient Near Eastern cultural milieu of which ancient Israel had been a part, this was not the case for the Greco-Roman cultural milieu in which Josephus found himself. Greece's ancient history, as described by Homer and other poets, seems to have been comfortable with polygyny at least among the elite, but by the historical period, monogamy “was firmly established as the only legitimate marriage system: polygamy was considered a barbarian custom.”\(^{19}\) There were occasional exceptions for certain kings, particularly in Macedonian dynasties, but in general, even “Greeks abroad ... did not necessarily adopt more relaxed customs.... Prescriptive monogamy remained a defining feature of being Greek.”\(^{20}\) One example where this feature of Greek culture shows up in the literature is Euripides's play *Andromache*, when the Greek Hermione scorns the non-Greek Andromache, whom she accuses of coming after Hermione's husband:

For Asiatic woman have clever minds for such things.... But this is a Greek city.... This is how all Barbarians are ... and no law restrains any of this. For it is not proper for a [Greek] man to hold the reins of two wives, but he is content looking for a single ‘Aphrodite' for his bed.\(^{21}\)

Similarly, Roman marital laws only recognized monogamy: “A person who apparently took a second wife without divorcing the first was entering a relationship that was legally null ... [and] any children would be illegitimate.”\(^{22}\) As with the Greeks, the Romans came to see their dedication to legally recognized monogamy as a point of pride that separated them from less civilized nations; Augustine referred to monogamy as a “Roman norm [more Romano]” (*Bon. conj. 7*).\(^{23}\)

One text where Roman disgust for foreign polygamy manifests is an account by the Roman historian Sallust, who wrote a century prior to Josephus. When describing one of the marriages of Jugurtha, king of Numidia in northwest Africa, Sallust observed that “such a tie is taken lightly among the Numidians and Moors because individuals have as many wives as their means permit.... Thus devotion is parcelled out by the large number; no wife holds a position as

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19 Scheidel, “A Peculiar Institution?,” 283.
23 See Augustine, *De bono coniugali*, 16–17.
a partner; all are equally of slight value [partier omnes viles sunt].”24 Another example comes from the historian Tacitus, a contemporary of Josephus, who in 98 CE praised the barbarian Germani for controlling their lust and doing marriage the right way: “they are almost the only barbarians who are content with a wife apiece [singuis uxoribus].”25

Given how accustomed we are in the modern Western world to legally enforced monogamy, many scholars have underestimated just how radical Greek and Roman attitudes were at that point in history.26 The fact that these two imperial and cultural forces looked down on polygyny as barbaric caused tensions with the polygynous majority in the east, including with the Jews. Those tensions would come to a head in 383 CE when Emperor Theodosius formally outlawed polygyny among the Jews: “None of the Jews shall keep his custom in marriage unions, neither shall he contract nuptials according to his law, or enter into several matrimonies at the same time.”27 This statement was followed a century and a half later by Justinian, who prohibited “abominable marriages,” including polygyny.28 Although these prohibitions came after Josephus’s time, they point to the intensity of the cultural attitudes that Josephus had to navigate.

1.2 Polygyny in the Patriarchal Narratives in Genesis and in Antiquities
When he re-narrates the stories of Abraham and Jacob and their several marriages, Josephus no doubt knew that Greek and Roman readers would find these marital arrangements distasteful. At nearly the same time that Josephus composed his version of Jewish history in Antiquities, Tacitus wrote a scathing account of Jews, claiming that “they permit all that we abhor…. [Their] customs … are base and abominable…. As a race, they are prone to lust [proiectissima ad libidinem], … among themselves nothing is unlawful.”29 Although Tacitus does not specifically identify polygyny as one of the Jews’ lustful practices, he (as cited above) and other Roman authors did pair polygyny and lust in other cases, so that conceptual link was in the air. If Josephus wanted to present a version of Jewish history that put his people in a better light, it makes sense that polygyny would have to be treated with caution. When we look at the patriarchs’ marriages in Antiquities, there are a number of places where

24  Sallust, War with Jugurtha, 80.6.
25  Tacitus, Germania, 18.
26  See Scheidel, “A Peculiar Institution?”
28  Satlow, Jewish Marriage in Antiquity, 189–90. For Jewish reactions to this hostility, see Satlow, “Rhetoric and Assumptions.”
29  Tacitus, Histories, v, 4–5.
Josephus skips, adds, or modifies his source material, and I believe that there are patterns to these changes and that they had the effect of making these stories more palatable to Greco-Roman sensibilities.30

In some cases, Josephus simply skips incidental references to patriarchal polygyny. These include Gen 22:23, which reports that Abraham’s brother Nahor had a concubine (פֶּלֶגשׂ/παλλακῆς) named Reumah, who bore him four sons, as well as the account in Gen 25:6 of Abraham having sons with an unspecified number of concubines (פָּלָלָכֲשָׁם/παλλακῶν). Josephus also fails to include the biblical Laban’s final request of the departing Jacob in Gen 31:50 that he promise not to mistreat Laban’s daughters by taking even more wives. Because none of these passages are crucial to the narrative, leaving them out lessens the presence of polygyny without ruining the integrity of the stories.

In other cases, Josephus modifies or adds (without skipping) material in ways that either lessens the extent of the patriarchs’ polygyny or makes their polygyny sound more acceptable. Below, I will highlight Josephus’s changes to the stories of (1) Hagar, (2) Keturah, (3) Rachel and Leah, and (4) Bilhah and Zilpah.

1.2.1 Abraham and Hagar

In Gen 16:1–2, Sarah has not been able to bear Abraham a child and she instructs Abraham to have children through Sarah’s Egyptian maidservant, Hagar. In

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30 Scholars have found it difficult to identify the biblical base text(s) that Josephus utilized (Feldman, Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible, 30–36). Some argue that Josephus exclusively or primarily used a Hebrew version (Nodet, The Hebrew Bible of Josephus). Several studies, however, have conclusively demonstrated that at various points in Antiquities Josephus must have at least consulted a Greek source (Ulrich, “Josephus’ Biblical Text”; Rajak, Translation and Survival, 252–54). This has led to the common position that Josephus used both Hebrew and Greek Bible texts (Castelli, “Between Tradition and Innovation”; Castelli, “Josephus and the Septuagint”), although a more recent argument posits that the definitive evidence for Greek should be prioritized over the assumption that Josephus used a Hebrew text, if indeed he knew Hebrew at all (Satlow, Josephus’s Knowledge of Scripture”). Complicating matters further, limited evidence suggests he at times consulted some Aramaic targumim (Schalit, “Evidence of an Aramaic Source”). In this article, I will cite the Septuagint when comparing Josephus to scripture, based on Feldman’s observation that, in the book of Genesis specifically, “Josephus seems to be following the Septuagint, rather than the Hebrew text, in more instances” (Feldman, Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible, 35). However, some uncertainty remains, as it can be difficult to tell when Josephus is translating, copying, paraphrasing, or adapting a biblical text (see Norton, Contours of the Text, 58–63). This uncertainty thus necessitates “a certain caution [regarding] suggestions on our part as to why Josephus seems to have omitted or changed a feature in the biblical story” (Spilsbury, Image of the Jew, 24). While I acknowledge this methodological difficulty, the patterns that I will draw attention to here are pervasive enough that we may cautiously suggest intentionality on Josephus’s part.
contrast, *Ant.* 1.186–188 presents *God* as the one who instructs Abraham to take Hagar. Rather than local custom, then, Abraham’s relationship to Hagar is framed as an exceptional and divinely-appointed command.

Josephus also adjusts the vocabulary used to describe Hagar. Whereas Gen 16:3 very clearly identifies Hagar as a “wife” (אשה in the MT; γυνή in the LXX), Josephus skips that phrase. Later, Josephus adds a non-biblical description of Hagar as a “concubine” (παλλακή, *Ant.* 1.314). Both of these adjustments downplay Hagar’s marital status with Abraham.

1.2.2 Abraham and Keturah

Gen 25 opens with an announcement that is as important as it is curt: “And Abraham again took a wife, whose name was Keturah” (Προσθέμενος δὲ Αβραὰμ ἠλαβεν γυναῖκα, ᾗ ὄνομα Χεττούρα, Gen 25:1 LXX). Verse 2 reports the names of Abraham and Keturah’s six children, v. 3 some of their grandchildren, and then vv. 5–6 explain that Abraham gave gifts to his sons and sent them away, reserving his full inheritance for Isaac.

This laconic account vacillates regarding Keturah’s marital status: v. 1 calls her Abraham’s “wife” (παρθενική), but v. 6 mentions Abraham’s “concubines” (παλλακῶν) and the context implies that Keturah may have been counted among that group. Similarly unclear is the question of when Abraham married Keturah. In the canonical text, Keturah is introduced long after Sarah’s death (Gen 23:2), but because Keturah and her children are mentioned so summarily, as well as so close to the account of Abraham’s own death (Gen 25:7–8), the narrative does not demand that we take these events in strict chronological sequence. The question of whether Abraham married Keturah before or after Sarah’s death has important implications: if Keturah coexisted with Sarah, it might be more likely that Keturah was a concubine, but if Keturah came along after Sarah, it might be more likely that she was married as a full wife.31

In his retelling, Josephus makes two changes that are relevant to the question of Keturah’s marital status. First, Josephus skips over the label “wife” (אשה/γυναῖκα) that Genesis had used. Second, Josephus adds a chronological marker: “And later he married Keturah” (Γαμεῖ δ’ αὐτὸς Κατούραν ὕστερον, *Ant.* 1.238). Tellingly, the narrative event that the inserted ὕστερος “later, afterwards” points back to is none other than Sarah’s passing. That these two events would be

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31 Interpreters have gone both ways on this issue. As one interesting historical example, a marginal note alongside Gen 25:1 in the Geneva Bible informed generations of English-speaking Protestant readers that Abraham took Keturah “Whiles Saràh was yet alieue” (*Geneva Bible*). For a survey of modern scholarly positions, see Rothstein, “Text and Context,” 258 n. 38.
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connected was not a given: in the biblical account, eighty-five verses separate the announcements of Sarah’s death (Gen 23:2) and of Keturah’s marriage (Gen 25:2). But because Josephus skips, condenses, or reorders the events of Gen 23:3–24:67, his retelling includes only two sentences in between Sarah’s death (Ant. 1.237) and Keturah’s marriage (Ant. 1.238), and those two sentences simply relate Sarah’s burial. Thus, unlike the Genesis account where the relative timing of Keturah’s marriage is open to interpretation, Josephus makes it absolutely clear that Sarah died, and then later/afterwards Abraham married Keturah. By framing events this way, Josephus eliminates the possibility that Keturah’s relationship with Abraham was polygynous.

1.2.3 Jacob and Rachel/Leah
The Genesis account of Jacob’s marriages to Rachel and Leah is full of drama bordering on scandal, from Leah’s deceptive wedding-night substitution to Rachel’s plea that she’ll die unless Jacob gives her children. Certainly Rachel and Leah’s jealous relationship provides ample justification for Lev 18:18’s instructions not to marry two sisters simultaneously. In his retelling of the story, however, Josephus presents this love triangle in the best possible light.

Josephus first prepares his readers to accept Jacob’s unusual relationships by modifying God’s conversation with Jacob as the latter travels to Haran. In Gen 28:13–15, God makes promises to Jacob and his future offspring, and while this implies marriage, Josephus adds specific promises that “your marriage will be accomplished, on which you are intent” (ἀνυσθή σεται… σοι γάμος, ἐφ’ ὃν ἐσπούδακας, Ant. 1.282) and that God would bless all of Jacob’s future endeavors (Ant. 1.283). These statements communicate to readers, even before the actual presentation of Jacob’s multiple marriages, that Jacob’s relationships have divine approval. The propriety of Jacob’s marriages is later reinforced when the omniscient third-person narrator explains that Laban’s actions to have Jacob marry Leah were “not [done] out of wickedness” (οὐ... κατὰ κακουργίαν, Ant. 1.302).

Josephus’s account of Jacob’s married years continues to accentuate the positive by improving Genesis’s depiction of Jacob and Rachel’s relationship. Rachel retains her biblical status as Jacob’s favorite wife, and their courtship is saturated with what Louis Feldman describes as “romantic flavor.”32 Upon first seeing Jacob, Rachel is as “delighted as a child” (ἡ σθεῖσα ὑπὸ νηπιότητος, Ant. 1.287) and Jacob in return is “overcome with love for the girl” (ἐρωτι τῆς παιδὸς ἡττηθεὶς, Ant. 1.288). Rachel is endowed with a “beauty” (χάλλους) that

32 Feldman, Judean Antiquities 1–4, 111 n. 847. On Josephus’s penchant for romantic motifs elsewhere, see Feldman, Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible, 185–88.
few women can match (Ant. 1.288), and she “burst into tears [and] threw her arms around Jacob” (ἕνδακρυς γενομένη περιβάλλει τὸν Ἰάκωβον, Ant. 1.291). Jacob’s petition to Laban for his daughter’s hand is protracted compared to the biblical version (Ant. 1.298–300; cf. Gen 29:15, 18–19), and Jacob gladly agrees to Laban’s terms “because his love for the girl compelled him” (ὁ γὰρ τῆς παιδός ἔρως αὐτῆς ἠνάγκασε, Ant. 1.298). Finally, after discovering he must work yet another seven years for Rachel, “Jacob was persuaded, his love for the maiden permitting him to do nothing else” (πείθεται δ’ ὁ Ἰάκωβος, οὐδὲν ἐτερον αὐτῷ ποιεῖν ὁ τῆς κόρης ἔρως ἐπέτρεπε, Ant. 1.302). All of this contrasts with the more restrained presentation of Jacob and Rachel’s relationship in Gen 29:4–20.

Josephus also enhances the quality of Jacob and Rachel’s relationship during their married years. In Genesis, Rachel demands, “Give me children or I will die!” (δός μοι τέκνα εἰ δὲ μή τελευτήσω ἐγώ, Gen 30:1 LXX), and in response, “Jacob was angry with Rachel and said to her, ‘Am I in the place of a god …?’” (ἐθυμώθη δὲ Ιακωβ τῇ Ραχηλ καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ μὴ ἀντὶ θεοῦ ἐγώ εἰμι, Gen 30:2 LXX). Josephus leaves out this heated confrontation. Later, following the exchange of the mandrakes, Jacob spends the night with Leah as he does in Genesis, but Josephus adds the observation that Jacob did this “to please Rachel” (Ῥαχήλῃ χαριζόμενος, Ant. 1.308). Finally, Josephus heightens the emotional impact of Rachel’s death during childbirth. Whereas Genesis simply reports that “Rachel died … and Jacob raised a stele on her tomb” (ἀπέθανεν δὲ Ραχήλ... καὶ ἔστησεν Ἰακωβ στήλην ἐπὶ τοῦ μνημείου αὐτῆς, Gen 35:19–20 LXX), Josephus adds that Jacob “lamented greatly” (πενθήσας δὲ μεγάλως) and named the baby Benjamin “because of the suffering that his mother had experienced with him” (διὰ τὴν ἐπ᾽ αὐτῷ γενομένην ὀδύνην τῇ μητρί, Ant. 1.343). Jacob’s feelings toward Rachel find tender expression even at the end.

While Josephus’s depiction of Jacob and Rachel’s relationship mainly builds on hints in Genesis, Jacob and Leah’s relationship receives a more substantial reimagining. To begin, the fallout from Leah’s wedding night exchange is much less confrontational. The biblical Jacob’s scandalized accusations against Laban (“What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served you? Why then have you deceived me?,” τί τοῦτο ἐποίησάς μοι οὐ περὶ Ραχήλ ἐδούλευσα παρὰ σοί καὶ ἵνα τί παρελογίσω με, Gen 29:25 LXX) are replaced by a brief third-person report (“he accused Laban of wrong-doing,” ἀδικίαν ἐπεκάλει Λαβάνῳ, Ant. 1.301). In addition, Josephus shows Laban actually apologizing (“And he begged forgiveness for the necessity by which he acted,” ὁ δὲ συγγνώμην ἦτείτο τῆς ἀνάγκης, ὑπ᾽ ᾧ ἦτείτα πράξειν, Ant. 1.302).

Next, Leah gets to enjoy her status as Jacob’s only wife for much longer. After Jacob and Laban re-negotiate marriage for Rachel, the Bible reports that Jacob only had to wait a week (τά ἔβδομα, Gen 29:27 LXX) for the second marriage,
but in Josephus’s version Jacob and Leah were a married couple for seven years (ἐπταετίαν, Ant. 1.302) before he was able to marry again.

Leah’s improved position continues during the course of her marriage, where Josephus paints her and Jacob’s relationship as more affectionate than does the Bible. Although “Leah was grievously troubled by her husband’s love for her sister” (τῆς Λείας ἡπτετο δεινῶς ὁ πρὸς τὴν ἀδελφὴν ἔρως τοῦ ἀνδρός, Ant. 1.303), Josephus skips the part in the Bible that says that “Lea was hated” (μισεῖται Λεία, Gen 29:31 LXX).33 In Genesis, Leah hopes that bearing her first child, Reuben, will win Jacob’s affection (“now my husband will love me,” νῦν με ἀγαπήσει ὁ ἀνήρ μου, Gen 29:32 LXX), but having children does not appear to have this effect. After bearing Simeon, she reports that “I am [still] hated” (μισοῦμαι, Gen 29:33 LXX), and after bearing Judah she continues still to hope that “my husband will be with me” (πρὸς ἐμοῦ ἔσται ὁ ἀνήρ μου, Gen 29:34 LXX). Conversely, in Josephus’s retelling, the strategy works immediately! At Reuben’s birth, Josephus narrates, “A little boy was born, and because of this her husband turned towards her” (γενομένου παιδὸς ἄρρενος καὶ διὰ το ῦτο πρὸς αὐτὴν ἐπεστραμμένου τοῦ ἀνδρός, Ant. 1.304).34 Hope becomes reality. In fact, Jacob’s affection toward Leah grows so noticeably that Rachel fears her position as the favorite wife is in jeopardy, precipitating her offer that Jacob bear children through Rachel’s handmaid Bilhah (Ant. 1.305; cf. Gen 30:1–3, where Rachel’s motivation in offering Bilhah is her envy over Leah’s children, not Jacob’s love).

33 Bruce Wells has argued that the expressions of love (“he loved Rachel more/rather than Leah,” ויאב גם־את־רחל מלאה, Gen 29:30) and hate (“Leah was hated,” שונאה לאם, Gen 29:31) were ancient Near Eastern legal terms that identified each wife’s hierarchical status in the household. Leah had briefly held the status of favored wife by virtue of being the only one, but after Jacob married a second wife he (unjustly) demoted Leah to a lower legal status (see Wells, “First Wives Club”). Wells’s thesis is persuasive in the context of Genesis, but it is unclear if Josephus would have understood that nuance; given his romanticizing of Jacob and Rachel’s courtship and stress on the ἔρως (“passion, romantic love”) that they shared, I suspect Josephus was only aware of, or at least only interested in, the emotional meaning of Jacob’s “love.” But whether Josephus understood Jacob’s “hate” for Leah in a legal or an emotional sense, in either case his decision to skip that passage in his retelling greatly improves Leah’s status within that narrative world.

34 The fact that Jacob does grow closer to Leah following the birth of Reuben means that Josephus must modify the etymological explanations for Leah’s subsequent children, since in the biblical account Leah uses their names to express her continued disadvantage. For example, at the birth of Simeon ( Heb. שמעון) the Leah of Genesis explains, “Inasmuch as the Lord has heard (Heb. הearer) that I am hated, he has given me this one too” (ἐτί ἤκουσεν κύριος ὅτι μισοῦμαι καὶ προσέδωκέν μοι καὶ τοῦτον, Gen 29:33 LXX). In contrast, Josephus simply states that Leah named her second son Simeon because “God had heard her” (τὸ ἐπήκοον αὐτὴ τὸν θεὸν γεγονέναι, Ant. 1.304).
1.2.4 Jacob and Bilhah/Zilpah

When Genesis describes Bilhah and Zilpah in relation to Jacob, they are usually given the title אשה/γυνή “wife” – the same word used to describe Rachel and Leah (see Gen 30:4, 9; 31:17; 37:2; it is unclear whether Gen 30:26 refers to all four women or only Rachel and Leah). In Genesis, the relationship Bilhah and Zilpah have with Jacob is on some level comparable to the relationship their mistresses Rachel and Leah had with Jacob – but not so in Antiquities.

Josephus immediately begins to rework Bilhah and Zilpah as they are introduced into the narrative. In contrast to Gen 30:4 and 9, where “[Rachel/Leah] gave him/Jacob her maid Bilhah/Zilpah as a wife,” Josephus instead says that each of the sisters “put her handmaiden Bilhah/Zilpah into bed with Jacob” (Ant. 1.305–306). The semantic shift from being “given as a wife,” which points to a marital relationship, to being “put into bed,” which focuses on sexual relations, is striking. The connotation of extra-marital sex is even more pronounced because the phrase “put into bed with” from Ant. 1.305–306 (παρακατακλίνει, derived from the word κλίνη “bed”) also appears a little earlier in the narrative. There the actor is Laban, who “put [Leah] into bed with Jacob, who was none the wiser” (οὐδὲν προῃσθημένῳ τῷ Ἰακώβῳ παρακατακλίνει, Ant. 1.301). Although Jacob and Leah end up married through this encounter, the bed-focused language is saturated with near-illicit sexuality: Jacob was not intending to marry Leah, but ended up sleeping with her due to a third party (Laban) who was willing to bend the rules to get what he wanted. When Rachel and Leah, each of them desperate for children, put other women “into bed with” Jacob less than a

35 Gen 32:23 (English 32:22) calls them Jacob’s “two maidservants” (MT שׁרֹתָיו, LXX τὰς δύο παιδίσκας... σύντομό), a label that is, as discussed below, at odds with the general portrayal of how Jacob relates to these women. An additional odd description appears in Gen 35:22 (LXX 35:21), which states, “And as Israel dwelt in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father’s concubine (MT וַיָּלָא הַשׁרֹתָיו, LXX τῆς παλλακῆς τοῦ πατρὸς σύντομό), and Israel heard of it.” This is the only time either Bilhah or Zilpah is described as a “concubine.” The label is, in fact, so incongruous with everything else we are told about Bilhah’s status that Westbrook, “The Female Slave,” 233, calls it “totally inappropriate.” He believes perhaps the author of this passage intended to lessen the “heinous” nature of Reuben’s crime (sleeping with a wife) by substituting a lesser offense (sleeping with a concubine); to achieve this goal, the author “was prepared to sacrifice legal or narrative consistency.” Sarna, Genesis, 244–45, offers a different approach to Bilhah’s exceptional designation, arguing that “the term [‘concubine’] has sociolegal implications within the context of the situation.” He believes Reuben’s actions are related to the practice, described in several stories from the Bible and the ancient Near East, wherein a usurper sleeps with someone’s concubines to legitimize some claim to authority. Sarna points to rabbinic commentary (see b. Shab. 55b) that had already suggested Reuben’s goal was to ensure his mother Leah’s primacy following the death of Rachel.
dozen sentences later, the crookedness and physicality of the earlier bedroom scene colors the reader’s perception of Jacob’s relationships with Bilhah and Zilpah. This sense of sexual impropriety, coupled with the lost descriptions of Bilhah and Zilpah as “wives,” drastically changes our introduction to the two maidservants.

Next, after Bilhah and Zilpah’s new roles as Jacob’s sexual partners are established, Josephus drops all of Genesis’s remaining references to Bilhah and Zilpah as “wives” (נשיות/γυναῖκες). In Gen 31:17, “Jacob arose, and set his children and his wives on camels ... to go to Isaac his father in the land of Canaan” (Gen 31:17–18). Given the context of taking everyone to a new land, “children” here must refer to all Jacob’s offspring and “wives” surely includes all four women. When Josephus arrives at this point in his version, however, he breaks the family up into two distinct groups: “the children of both [Rachel and Leah], and the maidservants with their sons” (οἱ ... ἐκατέρων παῖδες καὶ αἱ θεραπαινίδες σὺν τοῖς υἱοῖς, Ant. 1.310). Under this schema, Bilhah and Zilpah no longer fall into the category of “wives.” The final reference to Bilhah and Zilpah in Genesis occurs in Gen 37:2, where young Joseph shepherds “with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives” (μετὰ τῶν υἱῶν Βαλλας καὶ μετὰ τῶν υἱῶν Ζελφας τῶν γυναικῶν τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ). Josephus simply describes Joseph being “with his brothers” (μετὰ τῶν ἀδελφῶν, Ant. 2.11), skipping the reference to Bilhah and Zilpah. Thus, of all the occasions where Genesis calls Bilhah and Zilpah “wives,” we see that Josephus has skipped or rewritten every one of them.

In sum, we have observed that Josephus has modified the biblical presentation of Abraham and Jacob’s polygynous relationships, reducing the presence of polygyny generally and downplaying its drama where it remains. The cumulative effect would have made these relationships more acceptable to Josephus’s Greco-Roman readers, who would not have encountered so much polygyny in this version of the story. Next, we will explore two issues that are directly related to these marriages: the status of slave women who marry their free masters, and the status of the children born from these relationships.

36 Josephus does leave intact the word “wives” from Gen 30:26 (see Ant. 1.309), where it is possible that Bilhah and Zilpah were part of the group. However, it is more likely that only Rachel and Leah were intended, given the context of Jacob’s conversation with his father-in-law Laban. There is also one place where Josephus adds the word “wives” into his narrative (Ant. 1.326), but here too Bilhah and Zilpah are not clearly included.
Slave Women

2.1 Slave Women in Ancient Israel and in Greco-Roman Culture

In the ancient Near East, it was generally possible for slaves to be legally married, both to other slaves and to free citizens. A slave woman who marries, even to a free man, does not necessarily lose her slave status; she plays both roles simultaneously. When a slave woman marries her mistress’s husband, “the slave’s [legal] personality is split. She is a free woman as regards her husband and a slave as regards her mistress.”

In contrast to most ancient Near Eastern customs, Greco-Roman legal systems did not permit slaves to marry. Whatever relationships they entered into were not legally recognized, and their children became property of their masters. Meanwhile, male slave owners could exploit their slaves for sexual purposes. While Greco-Roman law chose legal monogamy, “adultery” meant only the crime of a free married woman having a sexual liaison with a man who was not her husband; in what was clearly a double standard, the husband was legally permitted to have affairs outside the home. The husband only crossed the line into what was socially inappropriate if he brought the other woman into his household. In fact, the drama that would ensue if the husband were to bring his extra-marital sex partner into his home to cohabitate with his wife was often “exploited by Athenian dramatists of the classical period.”

The big exception to the no cohabitation rule was slave women. While the husband’s having sex with household slaves could still be “vexing for wives, [it] did not seem to carry particular stigma and was never formally penalized.” The literature, both Greek and Roman, is filled with stories of men having such relations. For example, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, when a disguised Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca and spends the night chatting with the old servant Eumaeus, Odysseus’s invented backstory is that he is the illegitimate son of a wealthy Cretan and his slave woman. When Eumaeus shares his own backstory, he

38 Westbrook, “The Female Slave,” 234. On pp. 237–38 he elaborates: “Where the property and family interests in her person were located in different persons [her mistress and her husband], the law employed a subtle jurisprudential device: her legal personality was split between them, the two parts being governed by property and family law respectively.”
42 Scheidel, “Monogamy and Polygyny,” 111; see also Scheidel, “A Peculiar Institution?,” 283.
indicates he also was born the son of a ruler and a slave woman. The situation was perfectly routine.\textsuperscript{43}

For the wives in these relationships, “these casual or more long-lasting sexual encounters [between their husband and their slaves] had the potential to strain relations [with their] husband.”\textsuperscript{44} In Lysias’s \textit{On the Murder of Eratosthenes}, a husband asks his wife to take a crying baby to another room, but the jealous wife claims to know his true intentions: “‘Sure, so that you,’ she said, ‘can make an attempt here with the maidservant! You dragged her about when drunk before!’” (\textquotedblleft ἵνα σύ γε ἐφή “πειρᾶς ἔνταυθα τὴν παιδίσκην· καὶ πρότερον δὲ μεθύων εἷλκες αὐτήν”, \textit{Lysias} 1.12).\textsuperscript{45} However, a jealous wife had little social or legal recourse. The misogynist cultures of which she was a part praised the woman who “was so faithful that she turned a blind eye towards her husband’s liaison with a slave girl, showing herself to be a model of companionship (\textit{comitas}) and endurance (\textit{patientia}).”\textsuperscript{46} There are even examples in the literature of advice to brides on how to make themselves attractive enough to compete successfully with the household slaves for their husbands’ attention.\textsuperscript{47}

For the slaves in these relationships, there was also little they could do if their master’s advances were unwanted.\textsuperscript{48} “It was simply taken for granted that part of the degradation of being a slave involved gratifying the sexual urges of one’s master.”\textsuperscript{49} There are records indicating that sometimes relationships of genuine mutual affection did develop, but the relationships were still characterized by the disproportionate power held by the slave owner.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{43} Golden, “Slavery and the Greek Family,” 134; see also p. 146. See also Scheidel, “Monogamy and Polygyny,” 112.

\textsuperscript{44} Edmondson, “Slavery and the Roman Family,” 353.

\textsuperscript{45} My own translation of the Greek text presented in Lysias, \textit{The Orations of Lysias}, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, \textit{LCL} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930). Another literary example of “the jealous wife” is Hermione in the passage from \textit{Andromache} cited above; when she condemns Andromache for stealing Neoptolemus’s affections, it is significant that Hermione is Neoptolemus’s wife, Andromache his slave.

\textsuperscript{46} Edmondson, “Slavery and the Roman Family,” 353.

\textsuperscript{47} Golden, “Slavery and the Greek Family,” 153.

\textsuperscript{48} These masters are, again, men, who were free to initiate sexual encounters with either female or male slaves. Wives did not have the same allowance: “Roman social attitudes considered affairs between freeborn women and slaves deeply shameful, and a series of laws introduced heavy penalties” (Edmondson, “Slavery and the Roman Family,” 351).

\textsuperscript{49} Edmondson, “Slavery and the Roman Family,” 352.

\textsuperscript{50} Hunt, \textit{Ancient Greek and Roman Slavery}, 99.
2.2 Slave Women in the Patriarchal Narratives in Genesis and in Antiquities

Against that background of slave women in the ancient Near East and Greco-Roman society, we can observe what Josephus does with the depiction of slave women in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis.

In MT Genesis, Hagar is described as either a ספתיה or an אמה,51 which the LXX always translates as παιδίσκη “maidservant.”52 Josephus’s preferred equivalent when these terms appear in the Bible is θεραπανίς “maidservant,” and he uses this title twice for Hagar (Ant. 1.187–188). However, at the point of the story when Sarah seeks to send Hagar and Ishmael away, Josephus refers to Hagar as Sarah’s δούλη “(female) slave” (Ant. 1.215). The use of this word may not necessarily reflect any deliberate interpretative strategy on Josephus’s part: Benjamin Wright’s analysis of Josephus’s lexical choices shows that Josephus “did not distinguish very carefully among his words for slaves” and that, when retelling biblical narrative, he on several occasions “has apparently substituted doulos, or some form of it, for another word.”53 However, I think Josephus’s use of δούλη here merits a closer look. Within his corpus covering the Genesis

51 ספתיה is consistently used for Hagar in the MT of Gen 16 (vv. 1–3, 5–6, 8) and אמה in Gen 21 (vv. 10 [2x], 12–13). The split distribution in this case likely reflects disparate sources, and it is probably futile to try to use the difference in vocabulary to say anything useful about Hagar. One recent study on ספתיה and אמה concludes that while some “patterns of use” are evident in their distribution, the two terms are used synonymously to such an extent that “no general distinction in meaning ... can be made” (Bridge, “Female Slave vs Female Slave,” 21; see also Kriger, Sex Rewarded, Sex Punished, 35–53).

52 Providing English translations for ancient terms of slavery and servitude is fraught with difficulty at two levels. First, the Hebrew and Greek vocabulary (e.g., ספתיה, אמה, and δούλος, παις, οἰκέτης, θεράπων, ἀνδράποδον, σωμα, and κοράσιον) each have their own nuances that change with culture, time, location, and literary genre. As Jews of the Hellenistic diaspora, the Septuagint translators faced the challenge of describing the Israelite system of servitude/slavery (usually legally protected individuals living in small homes and farms in small numbers) in terms of the Greco-Roman system (often chattel slaves working in mines or large farms in large numbers). See Wright, “Ebed/Doulos.” Second, even when we understand a word in its ancient context, English glosses often inadequately convey the contextual meaning, or bring their own baggage with them. For example, while some Bible translators argue that “slave” in the sense of “someone who works without pay” better conveys the meaning of דוע or δοῦλος than does “servant,” others point out that “slave” for most modern English speakers brings to mind African slavery in the pre-Civil War American South or the pre-Wilberforce British Empire. These associations can be extremely misleading when projected into the Mediterranean world of two or three millennia past. For the purposes of this article, my glosses for terms of servitude are meant to convey convenient English points of reference. I use the same gloss when different ancient words are treated synonymously by the authors under discussion, but these are not meant to define their full semantic range.

material (Ant. 1.27–2.200), Josephus only uses δοῦλος/δούλη nine times, seven of which are δοῦλος “(male) slave” from the Joseph narrative. The remaining two instances are δούλη “(female) slave,” used once for Hagar (Ant. 1.215) and once in connection with Bilhah and Zilpah (Ant. 1.303). What makes this limited use interesting is that in the latter context, Josephus goes out his way to say that Bilhah and Zilpah are not δοῦλοι – “[they are] not at all ‘slaves’, but [rather] ‘subordinates’” (δοῦλοι μὲν οὐδαμῶς ὑποτεταγμέναι δέ, Ant. 1.303). Despite Wright’s observation that Josephus often uses δοῦλος indiscriminately, Josephus’s concern here suggests that there are contexts where Josephus does believe the label matters. And if that is true, it is striking that his only two uses of δούλη “(female) slave” in his retelling of Genesis both occur in the same context: identifying the role played by slave women who act as polygynous sexual partners to prominent patriarchs.

As with Hagar’s relationship to Sarah, in the MT, Bilhah and Zilpah’s relationships to Rachel and Leah are often described with the title שפחה or, less frequently, אמה, both of which the LXX renders as παιδίσκη (“maidservant”). Bilhah and Zilpah’s simultaneous status as “maidservants” to Rachel and Leah, and as “wives” to Jacob, is not a contradictory depiction. Rather, they reflect the two different spheres in which they operate. Their identity as Jacob’s wives provides them certain benefits, including legalized sexual relations with Jacob and status as the mothers of some of Jacob’s children. At the same time, their being given to Jacob as wives does not change their legal slave status. Bilhah

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54 For these statistics, see the charts in Gibbs and Feldman, “Josephus’ Vocabulary for Slavery,” 284–86.
55 It is true that Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher were conceived in order to provide children for their mothers’ mistresses, Rachel and Leah, and that these mistresses held a certain kind of ownership over these children; it is Rachel and Leah, for example, who name the children (Gen 30:6, 8, 11, 13). At the same time, several passages indicate that Bilhah and Zilpah continue to be associated with their offspring, who are not completely assimilated with Rachel and Leah’s biological children. First, as the family is introduced to Esau, Bilhah and Zilpah and their children approach Esau first, followed by Leah and her children, followed by Rachel and her child (Gen 33:6–7). Second, a brief summary of Jacob’s twelve sons lists them according to their biological mothers, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah (Gen 35:22–26). Third, Joseph is assigned to assist “the children of Bilhah and Zilpah” with shepherd work (Gen 37:2). Fourth, when the elderly Jacob leaves Canaan for Egypt, his many descendants are listed in four groups organized around Leah (Gen 46:8–15), Zilpah (Gen 46:16–18), Rachel (Gen 46:19–22), and Bilhah (Gen 46:23–25).
56 Thus Loader (New Testament on Sexuality, 51) misstates the situation when he writes that “Josephus [has] elevated the slaves [Bilhah and Zilpah] to concubines.” Bilhah and Zilpah are not raised from servitude up to the position of sexual partner with Jacob; rather, they maintain their status as slaves to Rachel and Leah while adding the additional role of Jacob’s wife, meaning a legal sexual partner who can legitimately bear his children.
and Zilpah are what Diane Kriger terms “slave-wives,” and Genesis vacillates in its emphases on each of these roles. Emphasizing their subservience, some passages distinguish between slave-wives Bilhah and Zilpah and wives Rachel and Leah. For example, “He [Jacob] took his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children ...” (Gen 32:23 [ET 22]; see also Gen 33:1–2, 6). Emphasizing their common conjugal status, however, other passages refer generically to Jacob’s “wives” in contexts where all four women are probably included. For example, “Jacob arose, and set his children and his wives on camels ... to go to Isaac his father in the land of Canaan” (Gen 31:17–18; see also Gen 30:26, as well as Gen 32:12 [ET 11], in which Jacob describes the women as a unit under the title אֲם/μητέρα “mother”).

Regarding Bilhah and Zilpah’s relationship with Rachel and Leah, Josephus largely follows biblical precedent. Where Genesis uses שפחה/παιδίσκη for “handmaid,” Josephus consistently employs the near-synonym θεραπαινίς (Ant. 1.303 [2x], 305, 335, 344 [2x]; once he uses the alternate form θεράπαινα, Ant. 1.306). As discussed above, Josephus also adds an explanation that these women were “not at all slaves, but subordinates” (δοῦλαι μὲν οὐδαμῶς υποτεταγμέναι δέ, Ant. 1.303). His substitute label, υποτεταγμέναι “subordinates,” is not a technical term and sounds suspiciously like a euphemism. Apart from semantics, however, Josephus’s insistence that Bilhah and Zilpah are not δοῦλαι “slaves” does not seem to change anything about how Bilhah and Zilpah relate to their mistresses Rachel and Leah in the course of the narrative.

Regarding Bilhah and Zilpah’s relationship with Jacob, I am persuaded that Josephus has subtly but significantly adjusted the narrative. Above, we reviewed the data demonstrating that Josephus eliminated all the references in Genesis describing Bilhah and Zilpah as Jacob’s “wives,” and I suggested that this move reduces the instances of polygyny in the narratives about Jacob’s family. Here we may extend that argument further: by downplaying the role of Bilhah and Zilpah as Jacob’s wives while simultaneously maintaining Bilhah and Zilpah’s status as slave women within the household, readers are left to see

57 Kriger, Sex Rewarded, Sex Punished, 314.
58 The word שפחה/παιδίσκη also refers to all four women in Gen 33:3, but the context makes it likely that here the meaning is “women” instead of “wives.”
59 Catherine Hezser points out that Josephus is elsewhere opposed to free Israelite men marrying “slave women” (δοῦλας, see Ant. 4.244) and suggests he may be trying to reconcile Jacob’s actions with respect to these slave women. Hezser, Jewish Slavery in Antiquity, 94. I will suggest an alternate explanation below.
60 An electronic search through the digitized text of Josephus’s complete works at http://www.perseus.uchicago.edu does not return any other instances of υποτεταγμέναι in Josephus’s writings.
Jacob as not marrying Bilhah and Zilpah but simply engaging in non-marital sexual relations with the household slave women. Because Greco-Roman legal systems tolerated free males having sexual relations with their slaves, Jacob’s behavior now fits more comfortably within that range of acceptable behavior.

3 Children of Slave Women

3.1 Children of Slave Women in Ancient Israel and in Greco-Roman Culture

Because slaves in the ancient Near East could be legally married, children born from such relationships were legitimate and could inherit their father’s status and property.\(^{61}\) In some areas and times this occurred automatically, and in others the free father had to formally declare that the children of his slave wife would inherit equally with the children of his free wife.\(^ {62}\) This explains why – in contrast to the slave-children of a Roman man, who would have to be formally adopted in order to become an heir – Genesis reports that Ishmael was automatically assumed to be Abraham’s heir until Abraham took action to change that. Ishmael’s mother may have been a household slave, but Ishmael’s legal status derived from his free father.

The status of children born to Greco-Roman men was directly related to the twin facts that these men could only be married to one legal wife but were allowed to be sexually promiscuous with their slaves. By law, only children born to the wife were legitimate. Children born to a free man and a slave woman (Latin *vernae*) inherited the legal status of their mother and thus were born slaves.\(^ {63}\) This principle of inherited slave status is related to the extremely low opinion free Greeks and Romans had of slaves, whom they believed were ill bred, dim-witted, and unsuited to public life in civilized society.\(^ {64}\) Fathers could free their slave offspring, but this course of action was only optional.\(^ {65}\) In fact, some men justified their relationships with their slaves on the basis that the resulting offspring “enhanced the property of the household with fresh supplies of house-bred slaves (*vernae*).”\(^ {66}\)

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3.2 Children of Slave Women in the Patriarchal Narratives in Genesis and in Antiquities

After Jacob’s family settles in Canaan, Gen 35:22–26 summarily lists all Jacob’s sons according to their mothers: Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and finally Zilpah. This ordering reflects the sequence of Jacob’s marriages, and there is no hint here that any of the children have a different legal status; they are all likewise “the sons of Jacob.”67 Josephus declines to provide a full list of names (he says he’s given them earlier), so he instead substitutes the list with this evaluation: “These are all the children of Jacob: twelve males and one female. Of these, eight were legitimate (γνήσιοι) – six from Leah and two from Rachel – and four were from the maidservants, two from each” (Ant. 1.344). In this striking claim, only Rachel and Leah’s children are γνήσιοι – “legitimate, lawful, born in wedlock.” The children of the slave women are, by implication, illegitimate.

At the same time, despite Josephus’s deligitimization of the children born from Jacob’s slave wives, Josephus also would have known that Greeks and Romans tended to look down on slaves and the descendants of slaves. This could possibly explain the line discussed above where Josephus insists that Bilhah and Zilpah are not “slaves” (δοῦλαι), they are just “subordinates” (ὑποτεταγμέναι, Ant. 1.303). Possibly, Josephus is hedging, as if to say, “these matriarchs were slaves, yes; but not those kinds of slaves.” If he is nervous about four Israelite tribes having an origin in slavery, that would also explain why he has no problem calling Hagar an unqualified δούλη (“slave”) – Hagar isn’t an ancestor of the Jews, so there is no reason to soften the nature of her servile status. This reading of Josephus admittedly does not suggest that he painted a perfectly consistent picture, but that is the point: if he faced multiple pressures pulling in different directions, we would expect at least some inconsistency as he balances competing concerns.

4 Conclusion

I have suggested that the biblical presentation of Abraham and Jacob’s marriages would have been objectionable to Greco-Roman audiences and that this provides a plausible rationale to explain the changes Josephus makes to the narrative. With contemporaries like Tacitus writing that Jews “are a people

67 In Genesis, the only possible example of differentiation between the sets of children occurs in Gen 33:1–2, when Jacob places Bilhah and Zilpah and their children at the front of his menagerie of a family, in anticipation of the (possibly violent) approach of Esau.
most especially inclined to lust," it makes sense that Josephus would have to be careful not to reinforce that idea to Greco-Roman readers. Josephus's exact intended audience is a matter of some debate, but even if he had in mind fellow Jews living in Rome, not just ethnic Greeks or Romans, a Roman cultural bias against polygyny would still provide a rationale for why that Jewish audience might have found polygyny distasteful. Other studies have suggested that Jews living in Roman Palestine at that time had a less favorable view of polygynous marriage than did Jews in Babylonia, a distinction that has been attributed to proximity to Roman influence. Josephus may have also been motivated by a personal bias against polygynous relationships, and if so, his reticence could still be reasonably traced back to the influence of his adopted cultural environment.

With that Roman context in mind, I have argued that the differences between Genesis and Antiquities suggest that Josephus sought to overcome three related challenges. First, the Genesis narratives describe multiple instances of polygyny, while the Greeks and Romans only approved of one legal wife. Josephus could not simply ignore these marriages, which were too central to the narrative, but he could skip unessential details (such as Abraham's several concubines), nuance certain passages (such as the timing of Keturah's marriage), and add new material (such as God's promise that he would bless Jacob in his marriages). Second, the Genesis narratives describe marriage to slaves, while the Greeks and Romans maintained that sexual relations with slaves were acceptable only as long as these relationships were not considered a marriage. Josephus thus deemphasized the marital status of Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah, while simultaneously emphasizing their status as slaves. Third, the Genesis narratives portrayed several of the Israelite tribes as descendants of Jacob's slave-wives, while the Greeks and Romans looked down upon the children of slaves, who would have been legally slaves themselves. While it had been helpful for Josephus to cast Bilhah and Zilpah as slaves in order to make their sexual relationships with Jacob more acceptable, Josephus hedges a little by trying to suggest that these mothers were “subordinates” but not quite “slaves,” potentially elevating Bilhah and Zilpah's status, and consequently their children, in the eyes of his readers.

68 As summarized in Gruen, Constructs of Identity, 265.
69 Satlow, Jewish Marriage in Antiquity, 189–92.
70 Although less likely, it is also possible that any personal bias of Josephus's could have its origin in his Jewish upbringing. Jewish literature of the Second Temple period indicates that some Jews disapproved of polygyny for reasons other than Roman custom, its equation with lust being most common. See Sears, “Ancestral Custom.”
Authorial intent is difficult to prove, as we can never be certain what an author was thinking. It is certainly possible to suggest additional reasons than I have outlined here to account for the various differences between Genesis and Antiquities. However, these differences appear for some reason, and regardless of what the reasons were, the cumulative effect is that readers of Antiquities will think of the patriarchs' marriages very differently than readers of Genesis, and as I have demonstrated, the presentation in Antiquities aligns more comfortably with the expectations of a Greco-Roman audience. I believe that Josephus's changes are consistent enough that we can postulate he was indeed engaging in deliberate apologetics. That he in other instances modified biblical narrative in defense of the Jewish people is well documented, so my conclusions about polygyny simply add to the established understanding of Josephus's editorial tendencies. The patriarchs would have been worthy of particular apologetic attention, for as Annette Reed points out, “In Second Temple Jewish sources, stories about Israel’s ancestors are not merely records that chronicle past events. Rather, patriarchs became paradigms.”71 Given the prominent place of Abraham and Jacob as ancestors of the Jewish people, it make sense that Josephus would have approached their portrayal with great care and, when necessary, great creativity.

Bibliography


71 Reed, “Construction and Subversion of Patriarchal Perfection,” 187.


