EXCURSUS:
THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE
‘FAIR WAGE’ INTERPRETATION

This study has thus far shown that, while there is little evidence that
the anti-Jewish writers had direct contact with the biblical story of the
despoliation, we have clear evidence of indirect contact, and that this
gentile awareness and usage of the spoliatio tradition motivated and
shaped the Jewish response. One could expect that the anti-Semitic
writers cited at length by Josephus in Against Apion, with all their animus
against the Jews, would have taken the time to read the Septuagint and
base their accusations upon the Jewish sources themselves. But there
is no evidence that they did actually know the biblical story firsthand;
at least, there is no evidence that they knew and exploited the biblical
despoliation traditions directly. The third-century Manetho may have
written before he had access to the exodus story in Greek seeing that he
flourished during the rule of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (283–246 B.C.E.)
when the Pentateuch itself was being translated.

According to Manetho (Ag Ap. 1:228–251), the exodus was led by
a rebel priest of Heliopolis named Osarsiph who changed his name
to Moses. Having formed an alliance with the Solymites, the descend-
ents of the Hyksos, Moses was initially victorious over Egypt which
he viciously pillaged (1:249) before he was expelled by Amenophis. The
specific language Manetho used of this pillaging, as it is quoted by Jose-
phus, follows.

καὶ γὰρ οὐ μόνον πόλεις καὶ κώμας ἐνέπρησαν, οὐδὲ ἱεροσυλοῦντες οὐδὲ
λυμαινόμενοι ξόανα θεῶν ἠρκοῦντο . . .

Not only did they set cities and villages on fire, not only did they pillage
the temples and mutilate the images of the gods,…1

Manetho goes on to describe the offensive behavior of the Jews under
Moses saying that they defiled their sanctuaries, slaughtered sacred
animals and humiliated Egyptian prophets and priests. There is no
indication of any direct contact with the biblical description of the exo-
dus here, yet the similarity of this version in Manetho to the relatively

positive (that is, not anti-Jewish) Pompeius Trogus is striking in that both of them refer to a plundering of temples as having occurred during the exodus. Of Moses, Pompeius says,

Becoming leader, accordingly, of the exiles, he carried off by stealth the sacred utensils of the Egyptians, who, trying to recover them by force of arms, were compelled by tempests to return home.2

Our key phrase “He carried off by stealth the sacred utensils” (sacra Aegyptiorum furto abstulit) is thematically similar to the ιεροσυλούντες of Manetho, and could reflect a common tradition. The same tradition seems to be operative when Lysimachus claims that Jerusalem was originally called “Hierosyla” (‘temple robbery’) because of Jewish “sacrilegious propensities” (Ag Ap. 1.311). Artapanus, as we have seen, also provides the reason for the Egyptian pursuit of the escaping Hebrews; they wanted to retrieve what had been stolen from them.3 It is possible this was an accumulation of older traditions concerning Egypt’s other enemies retrojected back upon the Jews.4 But while these may be little more than bloated rumors several generations removed from the Bible, they provide evidence that there was knowledge of the despoliation abroad, and it was this garbled knowledge to which the Jewish writers are responding. Philo, as we have seen in Moses 1:141, in noting how the Jewish accusers claim that the Jews plundered Egypt out of sheer avarice, provides further evidence that non-Jews were aware of the despoliation tradition at least indirectly, and that they made use of this knowledge in their anti-Jewish disputations.5 David Winston writes,

These citations all clearly imply that the Israelite borrowing of gold and silver vessels from the Egyptians had been a special target of the polemical and anti-Semitic literature of the Greco-Roman age and that Jewish writers found it necessary to provide some sort of apologetic defense.6

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2 Translation by Stern, Greek and Latin Authors, 1:337.
3 Eusebius, Praep. Ec. 9.27.35; Fragment 3:35 in Holladay’s Fragments, 223.
4 Goodman and Schürer note that the common notion that Moses led a group of lepers out of Egypt may have been an older Egyptian tradition about the expulsion of a defiled people that was transferred to the Jews at a later stage (History of the Jewish People, 3.1:601. Stern proposes that the temple-robbing tradition arose under the influence of the Egyptian’s later experience with their Persian enemies (See Stern, Greek and Latin Authors, 1:340). It is more likely, however, that we are here dealing with the Gentile misunderstanding of the later interpretive tradition that the vessels taken from Egypt were used to construct the wilderness tabernacle.
6 Winston, The Book of Wisdom, 220.