CONVENIENT FICTION OR CAUSAL FACTOR?
THE QUESTIONING OF JEWISH ANTIQUITY
ACCORDING TO AGAINST APION 1.2

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Introduction

This volume highlights and explores the crossroads between literary analysis and historical reconstruction. Most contributions examine the relationship between ‘what Josephus wrote’ in Rome and ‘what actually happened’—primarily in the Land of Israel. Presently, however, I am concerned with a different kind of historical reconstruction: What is the relationship between what Josephus wrote and his actual situation in Rome, his actual audience, the actual response to his writings, etc.?¹

The first few lines of Against Apion lead us to such a junction and raise such questions. In his opening address to Epaphroditus, Josephus claims that the evidence for Jewish origins and history should be sufficiently demonstrated by his Antiquities (Apion 1.1). He continues:

Since, however, I observe that a considerable number of persons, influenced by the malicious calumnies of certain individuals, discredit the statements in my history concerning our antiquity, and adduce as proof of the comparative modernity of our race the fact that it has not been thought worthy of mention by the best known Greek historians, I consider it my duty to devote a brief treatise to all these points…(Apion 1.2–3)²

Apparently, Josephus wishes to respond to criticism along two lines.³ He is first of all concerned with the alleged questioning of Jewish antiquity through references to Greek historiography. Secondarily, he claims that his critics are inspired by the “malicious calumnies” of Apion, Apollonius Molon and others. Presently, we will focus on

¹ This article represents a development of a chapter in my dissertation. See Haaland 2006a, 235–42. For a recent commendation of historical inquiry along such lines, see Mason 2003, 187–88.
² The writings of Josephus are quoted from the edition of the Loeb Classical Library.
³ For a similar analysis of the preface as a reference to a two-fold challenge, see Barclay 2005b, 31–33.
the former issue, which is Josephus’ chief concern in roughly the first quarter of *Against Apion* (1.1–218), whereas we leave out the previous literary treatments of the Jews and Josephus’ responses in the later parts of treatise.4

Chaim Milikowsky takes Josephus’ reference to contemporaneous critics mostly at face value:

Quite clearly, he is responding to specific stimuli: someone doubted the antiquity of the Jews, and instead of simply taking this doubt to be a sign of the doubter’s ignorance, Josephus feels the need to prove the antiquity of the Jews by recourse to the Greek-writing authors of the Jews’ neighboring countries.5

Other scholars are more skeptical. Martin Goodman suspects that these critics were “invented by Josephus as straw men to knock down.”6 Erich Gruen, similarly, expresses his “strong suspicion that he (Josephus) has concocted a confrontation on this issue.”7 John Barclay is more specific. He accepts the veracity of Josephus’ reference to criticism against *Antiquities* while suggesting that Josephus has misrepresented the content of the criticism. It was probably more a matter of cultural insignificance (cf. *Apion* 1.2: “not been thought worthy of mention”) than comparative modernity.8 Most confident on this issue is Arthur Droge:

Josephus’ reference to a “considerable number” of Greeks who doubted the antiquity of the Jews was a necessary and convenient fiction: necessary because it provided a pretext for his chronological argument in defense of Moses’ unparalleled antiquity; and convenient because the relative lateness of Greek culture was an easy target.9

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4 Several scholars emphasize that the accounts of the Jews by Manetho, Chaeremon, Lysimachus and Apion as we have them in *Against Apion* are the results of Josephus’ deliberate, rhetorical adaptation. The anti-Jewish bias of these authors may therefore originally have been far less conspicuous. See e.g. Barclay 1998, 203, 206–21; Gruen 2005; Jones 2005. Moreover, Feldman points out that several of those statements that provoke Josephus’ reaction may have appeared quite harmless or even commending to a different audience. See e.g. Feldman 1996. However, as far as I can see, it remains that Josephus was not the sole inventor of ancient anti-Jewish polemics.

5 Milikowsky 2002, 173.


7 In the end, however, Gruen apparently assumes that Josephus indeed faced such criticism. See Gruen 2005, 40, 48.

8 Barclay 2005b, 32.

9 Droge 1996, 140, cf. 117.