THE WRITINGS OF JOSEPHUS:
THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR NEW TESTAMENT STUDY

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It can no longer be necessary to make the case that Josephus is relevant for the study of the New Testament. Even lay readers of the Christian canon know that when specialists look outside it for illumination—concerning Herod the Great and his descendants, the Roman governors of Judea, the temple in Jerusalem, the Pharisees and Sadducees, the geography of Judea-Galilee, and much else—they rely heavily on Josephus’ *Judean War*, *Antiquities-Life*, and *Against Apion*. Readers are accustomed to seeing “Josephus reports that…” before statements in New Testament Introductions and reference works. That scholars often turn to Josephus not so much from choice as from bitter necessity, as he might have put it (*Life* 27), in view of his presumed moral deficiencies,¹ does not weaken the dependence itself.

To be sure, a substantial library of other Jewish writings from the same period (say, 200 BCE to 200 CE) has survived, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, apocalyptic and wisdom literature, and the earliest rabbinic texts. But that material was composed almost entirely for Jews,² who did not need to be educated about the conditions in which they lived. Because Josephus, by contrast, undertook to write self-consciously historical narratives for non-Jews, his work is plainly of the first importance for historians as for New Testament readers. The archaeology of first-century Judea and Galilee constitutes an increasingly valuable resource for understanding the general environment.³ But for specific human actions and intentions, which are the

¹ E.g. G. A. Williamson, *The World of Josephus* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), 307: “Josephus the writer deserves our warmest thanks; Josephus the man—not lovable, not estimable, barely tolerable—remains an enigma, but a fascinating one.”


stuff of history, Josephus remains indispensable to New Testament readers. Chronology reinforces the bond, for he composed his thirty volumes in the very period to which the canonical gospels and Acts are usually dated (70–100 CE).

Since another appeal concerning Josephus’ importance would be superfluous, my purpose here lies elsewhere. Namely, given that the works of Josephus are important, how should the New Testament student regard and use them? The shorter of his histories, the seven-volume *War*, is nearly as long as the entire New Testament, and wading through his twenty-volume *Antiquities* (about the length of the Old Testament) is a formidable task. Curious readers often purchase Josephus’ collected works—for Anglophones, often the 1737 translation by W. Whiston—only to find them impenetrable. Arcane details prove impossible to remember; Eleazars, Menachems, Aristobuluses, and Agrippas appear with disconcerting frequency in unrelated places; long speeches and details of geography, even botany, can be as boring as the moralizing is tedious. How does one find what one needs in this mass? And once one finds it, how should one understand it? Perhaps most important: What may the New Testament reader fairly expect from Josephus?

In what follows I describe three approaches to exploiting Josephus’ works for New Testament study. The first is the route most commonly taken: using Josephus as a historical reference manual. In this model, to which I devote about half of the essay, reading Josephus and doing history are assumed to be parts of a single operation. Even if one does not believe everything he reports, he is expected to transmit recoverable facts. Recently, however, some scholars have been working to separate the interpretation of Josephus’ compositions from reconstruction of the historical phenomena they describe. These critics draw attention to the artistry of the narratives and insist that historical deductions reckon fully with the nature of the evidence they seek to explain, which is a richly woven tapestry. While generally supporting that second approach against the first, I propose here a further step.

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