Josephus has much to say about many subjects. Yom Kippur is not one of them, however, his priestly antecedents and first-hand acquaintance with Temple procedures notwithstanding. In fact, his one more detailed discussion of the holyday is confined to four brief paragraphs in Ant. 3.240–243. Elsewhere in his corpus one finds merely brief en passant allusions to the occasion (see Ant. 17.165–166; 18.94; J.W. 4.164 (?); 5.236; Ag. Ap. 2.282), some of which are uncertain, and none of which adds significantly to the Yom Kippur data supplied by him in Ant. 3. Accordingly, it is not surprising to find that scholars have not given extended treatment to our topic. Thus, there are no articles focusing specifically on Josephus’ mentions of Yom Kippur and what scholarly discussion there is on the subject consists generally of a few pages in the context of broader investigations of other matters, e.g., Yom Kippur in antiquity, segments of Josephus’ corpus, or biblical-theological issues (see, e.g., Gallant 1988, 83–94; Scullion 1990, 187–194; Kraus 1991, 72–73; Feldman 2000, 298–300; Castelli 2002, 294–296).

In this presentation, I will begin with a discussion of Ant. 3.240–243 within its context in Book 3 and in relation to its biblical sources (Leviticus 16; 23:26–32 and Num 29:7–11) according to MT and LXX. Next, I will survey Josephus’ other (possible) references to Yom Kippur for the additional particulars these may supply concerning the day. In a final step, I will compare Josephus’ Yom Kippur references with those found in three other ancient Jewish corpora, i.e. the Temple Scroll, Philo’s Special Laws, Book 1, and the Mishnah tractate Yoma to see what similarities and differences emerge between his and their presentations of the day.

Ant. 3.240–243

As noted, Josephus’ one longer presentation concerning Yom Kippur comes in Ant. 3.240–243. That passage, in turn, stands within a segment of Book 3, §§224–273, delimited by the inclusion in §224a and §273, in which Josephus provides information concerning two components of
the Jewish cult, i.e. the regulations concerning sacrifices and the laws of purity. The former topic is addressed by him specifically in 3.224b–257. Within that segment, in turn, 3.237–254, adapting the sequence of Numbers 28–29, focuses on the fixed occasions for public sacrifices, daily, weekly, monthly (3.237) and annual (3.238–254), proceeding in the case of the last of these from New Years’ through Pentecost, with Yom Kippur standing second in the lineup.¹

In the Loeb translation (Thackeray 1930, 432–433; cf. also Weill 1900, 199–200; Nodet 1990, 174–175; Feldman 2000, 298–300) Ant. 3.240–243 reads as follows:

(3.240) On the tenth day of the same lunar month² they fast (διανηστεύοντες)³ until evening; on this day they sacrifice (θύνοντες)⁴ a bull (ταῦρον), two rams (ζῷοις), seven lambs (ἄρνας), and a kid (ἔρι) as a sin-offering (ὑπὲρ ἁμαρτάδιων).⁵ (3.241) But besides these, they were to offer (προσάγουσι) two kids (ἔριφοις), of which one is sent alive into the wilderness beyond the frontiers (ὑπεράρας), being intended to avert (ἀποτροπισμός)⁶ and serve as an expiation for the sins (παραίτησις ... ὑπὲρ ἁμαρτημάτων) of the whole people; while the other they conduct (ἀγαντεύομεν) to the suburbs to a spot that is perfectly pure (καθαρὰς τάσσωμεν)⁷ and there burn (καθαρώσαμεν) it, skin and all, without any cleansing whatsoever (μηδὲν ἁλάς καθαράντες). (3.242) Along with it is burnt (συγκατακαίεται)⁸ a bullock (ταῦρος), which is not offered by the community (τοῦ δημοῦ) but is provided at his own expense by the high priest

---

¹ In Numbers 28–29, by contrast, the listing of the annual feasts and their sacrifices begins with Passover and concludes with the eighth day of Sukkoth.

² In 3.239, when speaking of New Year’s that falls in the same month as does Yom Kippur, Josephus refers to this as ‘the seventh month, which the Macedonians call Hyperberetaeus.’ Nowhere in his writings does Josephus have an equivalent to the expression ‘day of atonement(s)’ of Lev 23:27.

³ Josephus’ only other employment of the verb διανηστεύω is in Ant. 6.22, where it is not used in connection with the Yom Kippur fast.

⁴ This is the emendation of W. Dindorf which Thackeray (1930, 432, n. 1) adopts. The codices read θύνοι δ’, which B. Niese retains in his edition, though indicating that there is a preceding lacuna in the text as so read.

⁵ Josephus uses the above formula a total of six times in his corpus, all within his account of the establishment of the Sinai-cult and its sacrifices; see Ant. 3.204,230 (bis),239,240,249.

⁶ Josephus’ two remaining uses of the word ὑπεράρας are in Ant. 4.295; 17.214.

⁷ Josephus’ other use of this term is in Ant. 1.93 (in a quotation from Berosus referring to the use of pieces of bitumen from the ark as ‘talismans’). On the word, see Castelli 2000, 295.

⁸ Josephus uses this expression, in reverse order, also in his version of the directives concerning the Red Heifer (see Numbers 19) in Ant. 4.79.

⁹ Josephus’ one other use of the verb συγκατακαίω is in Ant. 8.311.