Desires Crossing Boundaries: Romance and History in Josephus's *Antiquities*¹

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Josephus does not tell us whether he ever passionately loved a woman. His discussion of his marriages at the end of his autobiography is anything but romantic. It rather amounts to a list of consecutive wives and their respective offspring. The reader does not learn even the names of these women, let alone anything about their character or special attraction. Josephus presents himself as a man who is rationally committed to the Roman ideal of monogamy, in contrast to Herod, for example, whose nine simultaneous wives he mentions rather apologetically as an (Eastern) deviation from the norm.² Marriage is primarily appreciated as a vehicle for procreation and a means of solidifying social connections. One of Josephus's marriages was “commanded” by the Roman emperor Vespasian, another contracted in view of the woman's illustrious family. In some respects, however, Josephus's unions seem to have crossed boundaries. He married a captive woman, knowing that such unions are forbidden to priests, such as himself. More intriguingly, his Alexandrian wife may have been of a non-Jewish background, perhaps a convert, because her family is not at all mentioned, while Josephus immediately afterwards stresses the

1 It is a special pleasure to dedicate this article to my friend and colleague John Collins, whose work has substantially contributed to our understanding of Jewish historiography and Romance during the Second Temple Period. John's encouragement over the years has moreover been vital for the development of my own work. I thank the Niedersachsen-Israeli Research Cooperation (2014–17), which generously supported the research on which this article is based. Thanks also to Tim Whitmarsh for sharing an unpublished article.

“Jewish extraction” of his next wife from Crete. Josephus thus emerges as a conservative aristocrat as far as the ideal of marriage is concerned, but as flexible in terms of Jewish customs in the choice of particular women.

Despite his conservative posture, Josephus takes a keen interest in the erotic desires of his heroes. He is well aware of the fact that such desires emerge from the realm of the individual’s emotions and are by nature unpredictable, always potentially clashing with the norms of society. Cleopatra’s appeal is a shocking example in his eyes. Josephus deplores her erotic effect on Antony and speaks of his “enslavement to his love for her,” which rendered him blind to Roman interests. Echoing deep-seated stereotypes in Rome, Josephus complains about her manipulation of politicians, but he praises Herod for resisting her attraction, even though she “perhaps felt some love for him,” or at least “gave the appearance of wholly succumbing to passion.”

While Josephus’s romantic interests in the Jewish Antiquities have long been noted, they have remained on the margins of modern research. Martin Braun briefly mentions Josephus in his pioneering study History and Romance, suggesting that his embellishments of Potiphar’s wife and Moses’s Ethiopian wife are part of a broader Jewish engagement with romantic motifs. Braun paid little attention to the details of Josephus’s text, focusing instead on the Testament of Joseph, which abounds with novelistic images. Louis Feldman continued this line of investigation and significantly contributed to the study of Josephus’s romantic embellishments of the Bible. Taking the notion of the novel in a broad sense, Feldman showed that Josephus enhances elements of love in the Esther story, adds irony, highlights the reversals of the plot, and generally renders the story more attractive to Greek readers. In his magisterial work on Josephus’s Bible interpretation, Feldman also dealt briefly with erotic motifs in other stories, such as that of Moses’s Ethiopian wife. Finally, Emily Kneebone has recently revisited the Esther story with a view to Josephus’s


