Moses and Ethiopia: Old Scripturesque Traditions behind Josephus, *Ant.* 2.238–253

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In his retelling of the Jewish scriptural stories, the late-first-century CE Jewish historian Josephus included a detailed narrative about the young Moses as an Egyptian military leader who defeats the Ethiopian invader of Egypt decades before that same Moses leads the Israelites from Egypt. Josephus gives no indication that this material is not from the same sources as the surrounding context. Thus for Josephus, the story of the young Moses seems to be a “scriptural” or at least a “scripturesque” tradition. Similar tales are reported by the Christian author/excerpter Eusebius of Caesarea (fourth century CE) in his *Praeparatio evangelica* (“Preparation for the Gospel”) as coming from the pen of the otherwise unknown Greek author Artapanus, by way of the famous Alexander Polyhistor (first century BCE). Jewish “rabbinic” literature also alludes to this

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1 I have coined the term “scripturesque” to designate materials for which ancient evidence indicates that they were considered special, like what became canonical scriptures after the maturation of the codex format in the third to fourth centuries CE. After canonical limits were established (especially by “Christian” leaders), such “fringe” writings were given other names such as apocryphal, deuto-canonical, pseudepigraphical, para-biblical, and the like. But at some point(s) in their transmission they were considered to be “like” whatever was, or came to be, considered “scripture” (to be anachronistic about that topic)—thus scripturesish, or “scripturesque.” See my *Exploring the Scripturesque: Jewish Texts and Their Christian Contexts* (JSJSup 137; Leiden: Brill, 2009) for some other examples. See also my essay on “The Codex and Canon Consciousness,” in L.M. McDonald and J.A. Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 229–233, on aspects of this discussion.


material (these materials) in various contexts, as does the Byzantine *Palaea historica* composition, and a variety of Syriac sources. The story as told by Josephus is not found in any version of what came to be considered Jewish and Christian canonical scriptures, nor is it included as such in modern collections of non-canonical “scripturesque” materials (e.g., so-called “pseudepigrapha”), although the Artapanus version sometimes does appear. Presumably the omission in such collections is because there is little scholarly agreement about what “it” may have looked like “originally” in detail (no standard edition other than Josephus), or how “it” came about (etiology, transmission, recognition). But there is wide agreement that “it” existed in antiquity, in various forms.

Josephus lived in a “pre-codex” world, where relatively limited amounts of written information were passed along on individual scrolls of various sizes,