

Taking Josephus Personally: the Curious Case of Emanuel Bin Gorion

Orr Scharf

‘One¹ of the first books that my father placed in my hands was Flavius Josephus’s book of wars;² recounts Emanuel bin Gorion (1903–1987) in writing about his father, Ukrainian-born novelist and savant Micha Josef Berdyczewski (bin Gorion) (1865–1921). This rather odd childhood memory for a Jew born in fin-de-siècle Germany marked the beginning of Bin Gorion’s life-long fascination with Josephus, which was fuelled by personal interests as much, if not more than, by scholarly concerns. An all but forgotten figure in the annals of the Jewish republic of letters, Bin Gorion left a curious monument for the ill-reputed Jewish protégé of the Flavian dynasty, encompassing translations and original essays, as well as posthumous redaction and publication of his father’s studies on the subject. Bin Gorion made two primary contributions to the reception of Josephus by publishing translations based on Josephus’s works: *Das Leben des Flavius Josephus* (The Life of Flavius Josephus),³ in which he offered a biographical sketch of the ancient historian by assembling passages from *Life*, the *Jewish War*, and *Antiquities*; and *Das Haus des Herodes* (The

-
- 1 I would like to thank Avner Holtzman (Tel Aviv University) for his kind assistance and support of this project in all matters Bin Gorion/Berdyczewski; Jonathan Ben Dov (University of Haifa) for introducing me to Berdyczewski’s research, an encounter of which this chapter is a later incarnation; and Tessa Rajak for encouraging me to pursue the study of Josephus.
 - 2 Emanuel bin Gorion, *Reshut ha-yahid: Micha Yosef Berdyczewski (Bin Gorion) be-‘esrim shenotav ha-ahronot* [Life and Work of Micha Yosef Berdyczewski (Bin Gorion) in His Last Twenty Years] (Jerusalem, 1980), 110. Bin Gorion does not specify which text of the *Jewish War* his father gave him: *Des Flavius Josephus Werke*, vol. 1, *Geschichte des jüdischen Krieges*, trans. Heinrich Paret (Stuttgart, 1855); *Flavius Josephus, Geschichte des jüdischen Krieges*, ed. and trans. Heinrich Clementz (Halle, 1900); or the less likely overtly Christian translation with annotations of Philipp Kohout: *Flavius Josephus’ Jüdischer Krieg* (Linz, 1901). It is not implausible that the text in question was Niese’s edition of the original Greek, as Bin Gorion attended a gymnasium and became his father’s assistant at a young age. See Emanuel bin Gorion, *Ben shilshom le-mohoratayim: dapim ishiyim* [Between the Day Before Yesterday and the Day After Tomorrow (Personal Pages)] (Tel Aviv, 1983), 11–12.
 - 3 Emanuel bin Gorion, *Das Leben des Flavius Josephus aus seinen eigenen Aufzeichnungen zusammengestellt und übersetzt ...* (Berlin, 1934–1937).

House of Herod)⁴ – a collection of excerpts from *Antiquities*, the *Jewish War*, and supplementary rabbinical sources, portraying the figure of the powerful ‘Roman vassal’. Two secondary contributions belonged to Bin Gorion’s indefatigable efforts to preserve his father’s legacy, in which he redacted and published two unfinished studies of early Christianity that Bin Gorion Sr. based on highly unorthodox readings of Josephus: *Yeshu ben Hanan* (Jesus son of Ananias) and *Sha’ul ve-Paul* (Saul and Paul).⁵ Considering them as the pinnacle of his father’s scholarly achievements, Bin Gorion was convinced that these studies would transform the way in which both Jews and Christians would perceive their joint origins, yielding well-deserved renown for both his father and Josephus; hopes which, needless to say, were quickly dashed.

More than historical accounts or support for one ideology or another, Bin Gorion’s engagement with Josephus is an original portrayal of the ancient chronicler as facing a complex identity crisis that is very relevant to modern readers. In one sense, Bin Gorion saw in Josephus a source of inspiration rather than a source of information. He appears to have been charmed by the struggle of the Hellenized Judean for positive reception of his work, as framed by his Hellenistic acculturation, Jewish-priestly upbringing and political allegiance to Rome. And indeed, Bin Gorion’s writings are strewn with implicit confessions that he identified substantial parallels between the historical figure and his own predicament as a Jewish intellectual: first in the Weimar Republic, and later on, in the fledgling Jewish state.⁶ Yet, in another sense, it was actually Josephus’s credibility as a historian which stood at Bin Gorion’s centre of attention. This is one of the main qualities of Josephus that he chose to emphasise in the telegraphic introduction and afterword to *Leben* and *Herodes* respectively. This central theme must be considered in light of Bin Gorion’s attempt to earn scholarly legitimacy for his own father’s sensational re-written history of the progenitors of Christianity – Jesus and Paul – since it rested to a large degree on Josephus’s own legitimacy as chronicler. Therefore, Bin Gorion’s positing

4 Emanuel bin Gorion, *Das Haus des Herodes: Herodes und Mariamne/Herodes und die Söhne der Mariamne/Herodes und Antipater. Zusammengestellt und übersetzt...* (Berlin, 1936); Emanuel bin Gorion, *Hordos u-Veto* (Tel Aviv, 1946).

5 Micha Josef bin Gorion, *Yeshu ben Hanan*, ed. Emanuel bin Gorion (Tel Aviv, 1959); Micha Josef Bin Gorion, *Sha’ul ve-Paul*, ed. Emanuel bin Gorion (Tel Aviv, 1971). Emanuel bin Gorion also published a German-language lecture he delivered in Israel on his father’s ‘discovery’ of the historical Jesus in Josephus’s writings. The lecture offers a summary of Bin Gorion Sr.’s historical claim and the exposition thereof by Bin Gorion Jr. in *Yeshu ben Hanan*. See Emanuel bin Gorion, *Josephus und Jesus. Vortrag in der Bialik-Loge Tel Aviv, am 2. Oktober 1972* (Tel Aviv, 1973). I would like to thank Andrea Schatz for bringing this document to my attention.

6 I discuss this below, in the section ‘*Die Gestalt des Autors selbst*’.