Of the many Jewish authors who lived between Alexander the Great and the beginnings of rabbinic literature and whose works have been lost, Justus of Tiberias is to my mind the one whose works are the most sorely missed. Though he is best known today because of his (lost) history of the Jewish war against Rome and his concomitant dispute with Josephus about the course of that war, that perspective is a skewed one and simply derives from the fact that Josephus is our basic source for this entire period and thereby establishes the focal point for all of our discussions. Whether in his own day Justus was more known for this work or for other works we know he authored, a history of Israel from Moses to Agrippa and commentaries on Scripture, is of course impossible to determine.¹

¹ The testimonia about and fragments of Justus were identified and collected by Felix Jacoby, Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker (= FGrH), Part IIIC: Nos. 608a–856, II, Berlin 1958, No. 734, pp. 695–699. An overlapping but not identical identification and collection of the fragments, with English translation, was made by C.R. Holladay (ed. and transl.), Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors, Vol. 1: Historians, Society of Biblical Literature Texts and Translations 20, Pseudepigrapha 10, Chico, California 1983, pp. 382–387. A generally excellent discussion of Justus, with bibliography, can be found in E. Schürer, The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ, revised and edited by G. Vermes, F. Millar and M. Goodman, 3 volumes in 4 parts, Edinburgh 1973–1987, Vol. 1, pp. 34–37, Vol. 3, Part 1, p. 546. Schürer doubts the veracity of Jerome’s statement (in de viris illustribus 14) that Justus composed small commentaries on Scripture, ‘since no other author knows anything of it’ (p. 35). I am unconvinced by this argument: a moment’s reflection should be sufficient to persuade us that there are extant no other authors who would necessarily be expected to know anything of it. The Judaeo-Greek cultural synthesis, which Justus exemplified and which is discussed below, seems to have come to its end—in Israel—soon after the time of Justus, and what has been preserved, transmitted, discovered, or excavated are the rabbinic writings and some reworked pseudepigraphal works. Jerome, of course, is that early Church Father who made a special effort to establish contact with Jewish teachers in order to facilitate his study of Holy Scripture, and so if one were to ask of which Church Fathers would it be the most plausible that he would know of a Judaeo-Greek commentary on the Bible written in Israel, Jerome is the obvious answer. Also F. Jacoby in Pauly-Wissowa’s Realencyclopaedie, s.v. Iustus (9), col. 1344, rejects Schürer’s skepticism regarding the
In a seminal article published fifteen years ago, Moshe David Herr argued that Justus of Tiberias was the only Jew living in Israel who wrote original compositions in Greek. Herr presents this claim in a consciously polemical context—countering the too-facilely accepted claim of Martin Hengel and others that the level of Greek acculturation of the Jews in Israel was similar to that of Jews in Alexandria, Rome and other capitals of the empire. Whether or not Herr is correct that Justus was so unique—and of course both possible responses are unverifiable and unrefutable—his emphasis upon Justus as an uncommon exemplum of the penetration of Hellenistic culture among the Jews living in Israel is surely accurate.

More recently, Gregory Sterling listed under the heading ‘Graeco-Jewish Literature in Jerusalem’ five original compositions. Regarding three of the five he himself notes that their attribution to Jerusalem is questionable, or even very questionable; regarding a fourth, what he calls the Alexander Romance (Josephus, Antiquities 11.304–5, 313–47), his sole reason for attributing it to a Jerusalem author is the fact that the high priest and the temple in Jerusalem are the focus of the story, a very dubious justification. Only with regard to the fifth, the history of Eupolemos composed, it seems, in the second century B.C.E., can a good case be made for the claim that the work was composed in Israel, and so Justus, if not an unicum, is close to being one.