Josephus’ first goal in Contra Apionem is to demonstrate, against the claims of skeptics, the antiquity of the Jews. Given the fact that one of the skeptics’ major arguments derived from the general failure of Greek literature to mention the Jews, Josephus opened his response with general remarks on the late origin and lack of reliability of Greek evidence on antiquity, and on the greater credence to be given to oriental records (§§ 6–28). Josephus argues that the Jews’ chronicles are no less credible than the latter (§§ 29–43), and then—after some more disparaging remarks about Greek historians—he presents his own credentials for writing about the Jews and their history (§§ 47–56).

Following this prefatory material, Josephus offers in §§ 58–59 a brief outline of what’s to come. He promises (i) to reply briefly to those critics who argue, from the silence of Greek historians concerning the Jews, that the Jews are of only recent origin (κατάστασις); (ii) to cite statements by others (παρ’ ἄλλους) that do testify to the Jews’ antiquity; and then (iii) to show the absurdity of calumnies against the Jews. As H.St.J. Thackeray noted on 1.59 in the Loeb Classical Library edition, the second of these sections runs from 1.69 to 1.218, a point reflected clearly by Josephus’ notice in the very next paragraph (1.219) that he has only one task left of those promised at the outset, namely, the rebuttal of calumnies against the Jews. The second section neatly and explicitly divides the evidence adduced from ‘others’ between that of ‘barbarians’ (Egyptians, Phoenicians and Babylonians—§§ 69–160) and that of Greeks (§§ 161–217 or 218 [see below!]). In what follows, we will focus on § 218, a passage in which, according to most scholars, Josephus made two egregious mistakes.

* This paper began as a lecture given in May 1997 at the 26th Annual Conference of the Israeli Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies, Jerusalem.
The passage comes after Josephus finished assembling his citations of Greek writers on the Jews, to which he appended a complaint that some writers, such as Hieronymus of Cardia, deliberately ignored the Jews (§§ 213–214). He then continues as follows, according to Thackeray’s translation, which we shall use as a point of departure:

(215) However, our antiquity is sufficiently established by the Egyptian, Chaldaean and Phoenician records (ἀνώγραφοι), not to mention the numerous Greek writers. (216) In addition to those already cited, Theophilus, Theodotus, Mnaseas, Aristophanes, Hermogenes, Euhemerus, Conon, Zopyrion, and, may be, many more—for my reading has not been exhaustive—have made more than a passing reference to us. (217) The majority of these men have misrepresented the facts (τις μὲν ἄλληθειας . . . διήμαρτον) of our primitive history, because they have not read our sacred books (βιβλίας); but all concur in testifying to our antiquity, and that is the point with which I am at present concerned. (218) Demetrius Phalereus, the elder Philo, and Eupolemus are exceptional in their approximation to the truth (οὐ πολὺ τῆς ἄλληθειας διήμαρτον), and [their errors] may be excused on the ground of their inability to follow quite accurately the meaning of our records (μετὰ πάσης ἀκριβείας τοῖς ἡμετέροις γράμμασι παρακολουθεῖν).

Now to our problem. According to the consensus of scholarship, Josephus made a minor error and a major one in § 218. The minor

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1 I made two corrections. (a) On the one hand, at the end of § 215 Thackeray gave ‘historians’ for συγγραφεῖς, but I give ‘writers’. True, ‘historians’ is a frequent meaning. But here Josephus is alluding to the case he began in § 161, which was based upon citations not only from historians, but also from Pythagoras, Theophrastus, Choeirus and Clearchus. Similarly, we really don’t know that all of the writers mentioned in § 216 were historians. Hence, I would stick with the literal translation, just as Josephus himself, who sometimes uses ἱστοριογράφος when he specifically means ‘historian’ (C. Ap. 1.2; Ant. 1.133, 16.183), uses—at C. Ap. 1.72, 161, 215; 2.288—συγγραφέος with reference to the Greek writers assembled in §§ 161–217. For more on the translation of συγγραφεῖς here, see B. Bar-Kochva in Žurnim 61 (Winter 1997/98), p. 113 and my response ibid., 67 (Summer 1999), p. 90 (both in Hebrew). (b) On the other hand, at the outset of § 217 Thackeray translated ἄνδρας ‘authors’ but I turned it into plain ‘men’.