

The Reception of Josephus in the Early Modern Period

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The reception of Josephus needs no justification as the topic of this special issue of the *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*. In almost every nook and cranny of the early modern cultural landscape, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus makes an appearance: in theological discourses and polemics, in chronology and historiography, in biblical criticism and even in drama. What was the appeal of Josephus, and when and how was he read? Why was he the most popular of the ancient historians? Was it because of, or despite, the role of his writings within sacred history, as well as within the classical tradition, and how did early modern authors and readers respond to his status as a Jew? These are some of the questions discussed in the following essays, which are drawn from a seminar held in Oxford in 2014 under the auspices of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies.

Josephus was a Jewish priest from Judaea who participated in the Jewish revolt against Rome which culminated in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the emperor Titus in 70 CE. Of his extant literary works, all of which survive only in Greek and translations from the Greek, the first was an account in seven books of the revolt and its aftermath, of which at least the first six books were composed, probably in Rome and primarily for Roman readers, within a decade of the end of the war. The *Jewish War* (*Bellum Judaicum*) was followed, a little over ten years later, by the monumental *Jewish Antiquities* (*Antiquitates Judaicae*), of which the first half traced Jewish history from earliest times, paraphrasing the biblical texts, and the second half brought the narrative up to Josephus's own day. Appended to the twenty books of the *Antiquitates* was an autobiography (*Vita*), which focused on Josephus's role as a rebel commander in Galilee during the war against Rome. His

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final work, written after 93 CE, was a defence of Judaism entitled in the manuscripts and editions *Contra Apionem*; this work included in the second of two books a description of the Jewish constitution, for which he coined the word ‘theocrata’ to capture the role of God as ruler. In comparison to most other classical historians, Josephus provided an unusual amount of information about himself, not least in the *Vita*.

The writings of the ‘Greek Livy’, as Jerome called Josephus, were preserved and read later in antiquity by Christians and possibly by pagans, but not apparently by Jews. Translations and paraphrases of his works into Latin circulated among Christians in late antiquity, as did renderings, in whole or in part, into Syriac and Old Slavonic in the early Middle Ages. The *Bellum Judaicum* provided graphic evidence of the destruction of the Temple which Jesus had foretold (Matt. 24:1) and the *Antiquitates* the background to ancient Jewish history missing from the biblical books, such as the dynastic rule of the Hasmoneans and of Herod and his descendants. *Contra Apionem* was copied in the medieval manuscripts of Josephus, but apparently little studied.

The *fortuna* of Josephus’s works from the end of the first millennium CE to the early modern period is inextricably bound up with the historical narrative of Josippon, written in Hebrew under the name of Joseph ben Gurion by a southern Italian Jew in the tenth century and containing much material from the *Antiquitates* and a Latin paraphrase of the *Bellum*. This somewhat garbled version of Jewish history from the creation to Masada became a bestseller among Jewish readers, who used it as a guide through the years of the Second Temple period, which were badly charted in the rabbinic tradition on which they otherwise relied. Josippon was first printed in Mantua between 1476 and 1479 and translated into Yiddish as early as 1546, ‘for merchants who do not have time to study Torah.’¹ In the sixteenth century, the work was translated into Latin; and although its authenticity was questioned, scholars continued to peruse it with great assiduity and in relation to the genuine Josephus. Thus, for example, after rigorous study, Isaac Casaubon could assert: ‘You can tell that he is not just a translator of the Greek Josephus but an author in his own right.’²

The popularity of Josephus’s writings did not help to accelerate the printing of his original Greek text. Although Latin renderings (an ancient one ascribed to Rufinus and Sigismund Gelenius’s version) and vernacular translations poured out of the presses from the fifteenth century onwards, it was not until 1544 that the *editio princeps* of the Greek text was issued from Froben’s printing house in Basel. This publication did not put a halt to the repeated printing of Gelenius’s Latin translation, which was frequently updated as more manuscripts became available.³ 1544 was also the year in which the works of Basil and Eusebius came into print; as

¹ Two of the 2014 seminars, given by Andrea Schatz and Joshua Teplitsky, were devoted to the circulation and translation of the Josippon for the Yiddish-reading public.

² A. Grafton and J. Weinberg, *“I have always loved the Holy Tongue”: Isaac Casaubon, the Jews, and a Forgotten Chapter in Renaissance Scholarship*, Cambridge, MA and London, 2011, p. 204.

³ Andreas Ammann (University of Berne) is writing a doctoral thesis on the as yet little known history of the editing and translating of Josephus’s works in the context of Christian humanism in Basel and the Rhineland in the 16th century.

Anthony Grafton stressed in his opening and concluding sessions of the seminar, something about early modern perceptions of Josephus's role as writer of sacred history may be gleaned from the simultaneous printing of these three writers.

But just as Josephus seems to address different readerships in his works, so, too, his works inspired a variety of readers.⁴ For some, his narrative of destruction could be appreciated in its own right as drama and as a moral lesson about God's vengeance and the recalcitrance of the Jews, or used as a lesson to apply to contemporary political conditions.⁵ Complaints about the state of the text were raised by philologists but also served ideological purposes when questions of the authenticity of the *Testimonium Flavianum*, for example, were discussed. As an eyewitness to the downfall of Jerusalem and the massive slaughter that followed, Josephus fascinated, horrified and sometimes angered Christian readers of many different kinds. When the Latin *Contra Apionem* began to attract attention in the fifteenth century, his arguments about the history of the ancient nations, and his description and use of ancient Near Eastern writers who were credible because they were official notaries, brought to the fore questions of historical *fides*.⁶ Josephus's attractive additions to Scripture, allegedly based on sources of ancient and infallible authority, spawned their own rewritten Bible throughout the Middle Ages; some of the most attractive stories were then adopted and adapted in a feat of admirable dexterity by the master forger Annius of Viterbo at the end of the fifteenth century. On the other hand, Josephus's embellishments of Scripture were often rejected as the fatuities of a Jew: more than a century after Annius, Cesare Baronio would infuriate Isaac Casaubon and Joseph Scaliger by preferring the testimony of the Christians Jerome and Eusebius to that of the Jew Josephus regarding the celestial voices that were heard in Jerusalem before the destruction of the Temple, which Josephus had experienced at first hand.⁷

⁴ In his paper for the seminar, Scott Mandelbrote discussed the extensive use of Josephus in English education during the 18th century.

⁵ See, e.g., P. M. Smith, 'The Reception and Influence of Josephus's *Jewish War* in the Late French Renaissance with Special Reference to the *Satyre Menippée*', *Renaissance Studies*, 13, 1999, pp. 173–91.

⁶ See C. R. Ligota, 'Annius of Viterbo and Historical Method', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 50, 1987, pp. 44–56.

⁷ J. Scaliger, *Thesaurus temporum*, Leiden, 1606, *Animadversiones in chronologica Eusebii*, pp. 171–2, esp. 172: 'Conditor Annalium Ecclesiasticorum ausus est postulare Iosephum delirii, ut Sophoclem filii sui apud Areopaghitas, quod haec ad tempora belli Iudaici coniecerit, quum Eusebius, inquit, ad tempus Passionis Dominicae retulerit: quasi Iosephus ab Eusebio res Iudaicas didicerit.' Isaac Casaubon, *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes XVI*, London, 1614, pp. 649–50: 'Illud vero quod sequitur, neque verum est, neque probabile, sed mera est Hieronymi atque Eusebii hallucinatio. Scribunt illi, tempore passionis Domini, praesides Templi virtutes alta voce exclamasse METABAINΩMEN, ENTEYΘEN TRANSEAMUS EX HIS SEDIBVS. Scribunt autem ambo, tanquam Iosepho prius dictum: testem enim illum laudantur, & testem solum. Extat locus Iosephi Αλώσεως, libro sexto capit. 31 narrat autem hoc Iosephus inter prodigia quae urbis & Templi excidium antecesserunt, & vocem illam ait auditam noctu, tempore Pentecostes, anno ante captam eversamque urbe sexto, Christi 65. Hieronymus tamen & Eusebius ita rem ex Iosepho recitant, quasi ille scripsisset circa tempus passionis id accidisse. Verba Hieronymi sunt in Epistola ad Marcellam sub nomine Paulae & Eustochii: *Denique etiam Iosephum, qui vernaculus est scriptor Iudaeorum, asserere: illo tempore, quo crucifixus est Dominus, ex adytis Templi virtutum coelestium erupisse voces dicentium, TRANSMIGREMVS EX HIS SEDIBVS.* [Jerome Ep. 46.4: *Denique etiam Iosephum, qui vernaculus scriptor est Iudaeorum, asserere, illo tempore quo crucifixus est Dominus, ex adytis Templi Virtutum coelestium erupisse voces, dicentium:*

The question of Josephus's identity and reliability remained in dispute throughout the early modern period; but when necessary, his testimony could be called upon. So, for instance, between 1596 and 1604, the Jesuit Juan Bautista Villalpando, in association with his colleague Juan de Prado, produced a reconstruction of the Solomonic Temple and its paraphernalia as modified by Ezekiel's vision, in three massive volumes.⁸ In their view, the Temple foreshadowed the Church of Rome, and all its parts represented the mystical body of Christ. Indeed, Villalpando was convinced that a set of original designs drawn by the hand of God was somewhere to be found. According to Villalpando, all classical architecture derived from Jewish models, as did the Vitruvian rules for the orders. The Temple was a modified Corinthian column carrying a Doric trabeation. This was a fact, because in the *Antiquities* (XV.410–20) Josephus had claimed that the capitals of the Temple porticoes were Corinthian. Moreover, Josephus had also suggested that Herod's Temple was built according to Solomonic proportions, thus demonstrating that it was a faithful reproduction of the divinely inspired original. Villalpando's work received critical acclaim, and his illustrations came to adorn not only illustrated Bibles but also editions of Josephus – and to inspire the designs for Reformed churches and Jewish synagogues in the seventeenth-century Low Countries.⁹

Villalpando's ideological antiquarianism thus relied on Josephus, and incidentally brought his works into several different contexts simultaneously. This is only one of many examples of the influence, direct and indirect, of Josephus's writings on varied aspects of the religious, political and cultural history of early modern Europe. Such influence, and the many vernacular translations of his writings, made Josephus into a household name, particularly in English-speaking countries through the most renowned of the English translators, William Whiston (1737).¹⁰

From a variety of perspectives, the essays in this volume deal with the multiple ways in which Josephus's writings attracted readers, editors and translators in the early modern period. We have made no attempt to make this volume exhaustive in

Footnote 7 continued

Transmigremus ex his sedibus.] Observet candidus lector, non simpliciter Hieronymum dicere hoc ita accidisse. Eusebius in Chronico aliquanto aliter & ad veritatem propius: *Iosephus vernaculus Iudaeorum scriptor, circa haec tempora die Pentecostes, Sacerdotes primum commotiones locorum & quosdam sonitus sensisse testatur: deinde ex adyto Templi, repentina subito erupisse vocem dicentium, TRANSMIGREMVS EX HIS SEDIBVS.* [Ol. 202] Si dicerent Eusebius & Hieronymus, rem accidisse quam narrant, neque testem fidei suae Iosephum laudarent: non dubitarem quin esset illis credendum: nunc, quis non intelligit humanitus illos errasse, & in tempore auditae vocis insigniter esse lapsos? Itaque ne constant quidem sibi & rem eandem varie narrant, hoc est, variis modis depravant. Vide Lector quae notat Iosephus Scaliger ad numerum Eusebianum MMXLIV. Baronii vero iniquitatem nescio dicam, an supinitatem incredibilem, quis ferat? Parum est, quod errorem adeo manifestum non animadvertit: ille vero Iosephum etiam accusat, & vel crassa negligentia vel insigni malitia tempora vult confudisse verumque tam falso insigni illi scriptori obiicitur, quam potuit utrumque Baronio vere.'

⁸ J. Prado and J. Bautista Villalpando, *In Ezechielem explanationes et apparatus urbis, ac Templi Hierosolymitani commentariis et imaginibus illustratus opus*, Rome, 1596–1605.

⁹ This discussion is derived from J. Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: The Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History*, New York, 1972, pp. 121–6.

¹⁰ The English translations of Josephus and Whiston, in particular, were the subject of the seminars given by Mordechai Feingold and Tessa Rajak.

its scope as a representation of the rich findings of the Oxford seminar, let alone the topic as a whole. Our purpose has been to highlight some of the exemplary moments of Josephus's reception 'according to the manner of the receiver' (*Summa Theologiae 1a*, q. 75, a. 5).