

# Chapter 1



## JOSEPHUS AS AUTHORITY FOR FIRST-CENTURY JUDEA

The following study addresses what seems to me a fundamental problem in the use of Josephus's writings for studying Roman Judea, namely, his status as an *authority*. I begin from the observation that Josephus is, and has always been (though for changing reasons), regarded as the peerless authority for first-century Judea, and that this assumption runs even more deeply than we perhaps realize. My argument, simply, is that he should not be so regarded. This is not because he is unworthy or "unreliable" or only partially reliable—or because of anything to do with reliability. It is rather because the whole appeal to reliable authorities in the discipline of history is an error of categories. History has, or should have, a problem with authority.

After a consideration of the origins and bases of Josephus's authoritative status in antiquity and in modern times, I examine two case studies concerning matters for which he is generally assumed to be authoritative: the career of Pontius Pilate and the civil strife in Caesarea that, he claims, catalyzed the revolt. Finally, I offer some reflections on the nature of history and what it might mean to do history with Josephus's narratives.

### **Authority and Truth in Josephus: Origins and Character**

#### *Antiquity and the Middle Ages*

It is widely observed that in the Greco-Roman world the competition for honor (φιλοτιμία) was a zero-sum game played by members of the elite classes; each prominent man tried to assert his *auctoritas* at the expense of his peers.<sup>1</sup> The writing of history was but one occupation of the same group that led all aspects of ancient society: as magistrates, councilors or senators, governors, priests, landowners, and military commanders (e.g., Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, Fabius Pictor, Cato the Elder, Cicero and Atticus potentially, Sallust, Caesar, Tacitus).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. T. P. Wiseman, *Roman Political Life: 90 B.C.–A.D. 69* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1985), 3–19.

<sup>2</sup>For the Roman elite and its values under the early Empire, see S. P. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), 1–23, 162–211.

Works of history, increasingly supplemented by explicit autobiographical notes,<sup>3</sup> were an extension of political life. Like other forms of public benefaction and commemoration, but all the more because they sought to teach lessons to future statesmen, they reinforced their author's claim to recognition as social paragon and moral arbiter. As a branch of literature, history was produced and received according to the ubiquitous values of the rhetorical training in which the elite had been nurtured (Cicero, *De or.* 2.62–64).<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the author's perceived character (ἦθος) was the crucial criterion for acceptance, as well as the basis for his appeals to reason (λόγος) and emotion (πάθος).<sup>5</sup> Character was considered a product of blood lines, familial and personal achievements (especially military), wealth, offices, powerful friends, and benefactions given and received.<sup>6</sup>

Such elite competition famously characterized the late Republic in Rome, where powerful men asserted their superior potency and status (*potestas, auctoritas, dignitas, virtus, gloria*, etc.), until Augustus found a way to achieve monarchical rule while preserving a veneer of republican values, drawing all glory to his own person. Tacitus remarks (*Ann.* 1.1; cf. *Agr.* 1.2–3) that the scope for personal assertions of authority has by his time shriveled to nothing, yielding instead to flattery of the supreme leader.<sup>7</sup> Prominent men largely stopped writing history or autobiography; even those who dabbled in biography risked danger if they seemed to praise models of dangerous behavior or implicitly criticize the regime.<sup>8</sup> These vicissitudes of history-writing reflect its extricable bond with the author's prestige. A historical account, if not merely for show or entertainment, was a major political-moral statement by an actor-author (*auctor*).

Greek cities did not cultivate the same opportunities for personal power as the Roman Republic did, but there too the writing of history had generally involved an eminent man's production of an authoritative narrative (e.g., Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius). We see this in the "continuator" tradition, according to which each new historian sought to become the authority for his own age, taking up the past from the point at which an established writer had ended his narrative.<sup>9</sup> The process of continuation often combined a degree of deference with self-interested

<sup>3</sup>Cf. G. Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity* (trans. E. W. Dickes; 2 vols.; London: Routledge, 1950), 1:231–33. Two relevant cases are Nicolaus of Damascus and Josephus; the latter's substantial *Life* was written as an appendix to the *magnum opus*, to exhibit the author's character (*Ant.* 20.266–67; *Life* 430).

<sup>4</sup>On the passage, and Cicero's view of historiography in general, see A. J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies* (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 70–216.

<sup>5</sup>For these three sources of proof see Aristotle, *Rhet.* bks. 1–2.

<sup>6</sup>On the crucial role of character in history-writing see J. Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 128–74.

<sup>7</sup>C. S. Kraus and A. J. Woodman, *Latin Historians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 88–97.

<sup>8</sup>Tacitus, *Ann.* 3.76; 4.43–5; 16.7, 22; Pliny, *Ep.* 1.17.3.

<sup>9</sup>Xenophon's *Hellenica* continues Thucydides' *History*; Polybius continues both Aratus and Timaeus, and is in turn continued by Posidonius and by Strabo's lost *History*, among others. On the continuator tradition, see Marincola, *Authority*, 237–57.

challenge. Even among the accounts we know about, we can identify rival efforts to become the continuator (e.g. Strabo and Posidonius after Polybius), and the extant writers often declare that they are challenging earlier authors who deal with the same periods (e.g., Polybius 1.3.7–10; 3.6.1–4, 9.1–5; 12.2; 16.4.1; Josephus, *War* 1.1–8; *Life* 336–367). Polybius’s decision to begin where Timaeus had finished (1.5.2), implying a basic admission of authority, by no means prevents him from savagely attacking the same writer in the famous digression of book 12, further enhancing his own claim to trustworthiness.

When Josephus charges in his prologue to *Judean War* that his eloquent Greek contemporaries “write the history of the Assyrians and Medes, as though these events had been less finely reported by the ancient historical writers” (1.13), or “The industrious man is not the one who merely remodels another person’s arrangement and order, but the one who, by speaking of recent things, thereby establishes the body of the history in a distinctive way” (1.16), he seems to expect applause for scoring a lethal point. Namely, whereas he is doing what Thucydides and Polybius did, establishing himself as the sole trustworthy authority for this contemporary subject, his critics (a different group from those already disparaged in 1.2–8 for having written up the war in second-rate sophistic terms) appear obsessed with merely rearranging the work of the established ancient authorities. By alternatively doing battle with current rivals and fending off criticism from others, he attempts to secure his place as the unrivalled authority for this crucial period of Judean and Roman history.

In *War*, consequently, Josephus justifies his beginning point on the Polybian ground that earlier periods have been tolerably well covered by others (1.17). He acknowledges that others have written about the recent war (1.1–8), but he seeks to replace their “sophistic” ephemera with an authoritative guide based on unique access to both sides of the conflict (1.1–3). In this respect, at least, he succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. He did indeed become the sole authority for the period—until today. That those rival accounts did not survive even to late antiquity, as far as we can tell, seems to reflect their massive prestige deficit: they lacked the authority that he enjoyed, chiefly by virtue of connections with the Flavian house (*Life* 361–367).

In the elite circles that produced ancient history we do not find authors inviting their audiences, in any systematic way, to consider a series of specific problems of fact, review the range of available evidence (catalogued and located), and reach logically probable conclusions. Greek and Latin lacked any term corresponding to our “evidence” in this sense, their “proofs” (e.g., τεκμηρία, ἀποδείξεις) being of a different, rhetorical kind,<sup>10</sup> and although Hellenistic and Roman-period historians liberally used the language of truthfulness, precision, and probability (e.g., ἀλήθεια, ἀκρίβεια, ἀσφάλεια), those terms had more to do with rhetorical than empirical concerns. Lucian even sounds like Ranke when he insists, “One task only is the historian’s: to speak as it happened” (*Hist. conscr.* 39), until

<sup>10</sup>C. W. Hedrick, *Ancient History: Monuments and Documents* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 18–19.

we recall that it is a teacher of rhetoric writing and we read the context, which lacks any directions for getting at the facts.

Here too Polybius provides illustrative material. He decries the widespread trust of Fabius Pictor, justified by admirers on the premise that the Roman historian was a senator and a contemporary of the events he described. Polybius insists that readers test “what is said” and not simply trust “the one saying it” (3.9.1–5). This reveals that critiques of authority could be asserted and heard, but also that deferring to accounts by prominent figures (such as a senator) was the normal reflex. He asks the reader to “test the facts” (or “circumstances”) (ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν πραγμάτων ποιεῖσθαι τὰς δοκιμασίας) and not to assume the senator’s trustworthiness (3.9.5). Yet the example he provides as a critique of Fabius rests entirely on a matter of speculative judgment concerning Carthaginian motives (3.8.1–11)—nothing that can actually be tested. Or again, in his treatment of the Cleomenic War (229/8–222 B.C.E.), rather than interrogating the two main sources available to him as to their factual correctness, Polybius rejects Phylarchus’s account out of hand, on the basis of that author’s repugnant political sympathies, choosing rather “to follow Aratus”; Phylarchus’s “falsehood” (τὸ ψεῦδος, 2.56.2) consists in his alleged bias toward the Spartans, excessive sympathy with the plight of their allies, and failure to mention the nobility of Megalopolis, Polybius’s own city (2.56–63). Consequently, Aratus’s account is simply “true,” whereas Phylarchus’s is just as surely “false” (2.56.2). Truthfulness in history-writing was for him inseparable from *moral trustworthiness*.

Thus, although Polybius is regarded as one of the more careful historians, when he comes to divulge his methods for ascertaining facts he is disarmingly quick to invoke character-based criteria and “probability” arguments based upon character.<sup>11</sup> He justifies his prefatory account of the first Punic War on the grounds that the two existing sources are biased toward either the Romans or the Carthaginians: his truthfulness will consist in his *avoidance of such bias*, praising even enemies and chastising even friends (1.14.1–8). We find the same understanding of truth or accuracy as avoidance of partisanship among his many Greek and Roman successors, famously in Tacitus’s promise to write *sine ira et studio* (Ann. 1.1), and spelled out in Lucian of Samosata’s well-known essay on *How History Should be Written*:<sup>12</sup> “This, then, is what the historian should be: fearless, incorruptible, free, a friend of frank speech and truth, who calls a fig a fig and a trough a trough, as the comic writer says” (*Hist. conscr.* 41). “Truth” here is tested by freedom from bias; the crucial question of *how one knows* is all but ignored.

It would be easy, but surely misguided, to trivialize this understanding of balance and frank speech toward friends and enemies as the essence of “truthfulness.” To be sure, it was part and parcel of the larger moral-rhetorical context

<sup>11</sup>Who advised young King Philip to conduct his impious assault on Thermos? Even one who was not present, Polybius avers, *may discern from the character of his two advisors* that it must have been Demetrius (5.12.5–8).

<sup>12</sup>*Hist. conscr.* 8–13. See in general Woodman, *Rhetoric*, 70–116, esp. 73–75.

of ancient historiography that one appear to speak the truth fearlessly. But this preoccupation had real meaning in the social context in which histories were “published”—which is to say orally, before an immediate live audience.<sup>13</sup> Authors had to be reminded and cajoled to remember indeterminate future readers (Lucian, *Hist. conscr.* 13, 40) because inevitably one wrote for one’s local peer audiences (*Hist. conscr.* 10). In such public contexts everyone understood that, although it was easy to speak ill of enemies not present, it really did take courage not to flatter the powerful, especially if they or their friends were present at a recital, and genuine moral fortitude to openly criticize them. Nevertheless, this is not what we normally mean in the first instance by truthfulness and accuracy, and the difference is vast.

So, when Josephus speaks about writing the truth (ἀλήθεια) with precision (ἀκριβεια; *War* 1.6, 9, 17, 30; 7.454; *Ant.* 1.4; *Life* 360–361, 364–367; *Ag. Ap.* 1.6, 50), his meaning is clear from the context. Whereas other writers in Rome are predictably flattering those now in power, while denigrating the defeated Judeans (*War* 1.2, 6–8), he will set the record straight and tell the truth, *which is to say*, he will not overcompensate by praising his compatriots too much, but will give due praise and blame to both sides (1.9). The opposite of truth here is not simple factual error, but *bias*.<sup>14</sup> The post-Enlightenment notion of facts *in themselves*, which impose themselves on all neutral observers no matter what their social status, and which deserve to be studied precisely for their intrinsic merit, in order to “get it right,” is a different concept altogether—and still a long way off.

Except in his opening claim to eyewitness status (*War* 1.2–3), which cannot account for much of the narrative content,<sup>15</sup> Josephus’s *War* and *Life* divulge little about the sources of his knowledge.<sup>16</sup> *Judean Antiquities* is different: not a war monograph, it presents itself as the translation of another corpus, the sacred texts of the Judeans (*Ant.* 1.5–10), and along the way cites many other supporting documents and texts by name. But even there Josephus makes it clear that his priestly status and peerless character are the principal guarantees of his truthful interpretation, the authority behind the artful creation of this “useful” and “beautiful” work (*Ant.* 1.9).<sup>17</sup> No one else could have produced it, he declares, citing his combination of illustrious ancestry and unique achievement (20.266–267), and that is presumably why he was pressed into doing it (1.10).

<sup>13</sup>Lucian, *Hist. conscr.* 7, 29; cf. R. J. Starr, “The Circulation of Texts in the Ancient World,” *Mnemosyne* 64 (1987): 213–23.

<sup>14</sup>Marincola, *Authority*, 158–74.

<sup>15</sup>That is, he cannot have known *by personal observation* anything until about 50 c.e., when he turned thirteen, or anything that occurred in the towns where he was not present (including, presumably, the crucial events in Caesarea from 59 to 66, at *War* 2.266ff.), or in besieged sites where he was not on the inside—notably Jerusalem.

<sup>16</sup>In *War* itself Josephus reveals little about his sources, though he leaves openings when he mentions deserters from besieged sites or the old woman and children who survived Masada (*War* 7.399). Only in *The Life* (358–367) and *Against Apion* (1.50–56) will he indicate more solid resources: an allegedly extensive correspondence with King Agrippa II and consultation of the Roman generals’ *commentarii*.

<sup>17</sup>*Ant.* 1.6–9; 16.187; 20.266–267.

Throughout his entire corpus, Josephus obviously bends episodes to his narrator's will. To take a small but telling example: when the wealthy Maria addresses the infant she is about to eat (inside besieged Jerusalem, the story being known to Josephus and the Romans *by rumor*; *War* 6.214) she expounds upon the evils of "war, famine, and civil strife" (6.205). This little speech conveniently reprises a programmatic triad from the prologue (1.27), the three evils for which Josephus has since blamed the rebels (4.137; cf. 375–376), and what the Romans recognize as the Judean plight (6.13); most strikingly, it anticipates Titus's re-statement of the same triad when he hears of the enormity a few sentences later (6.215–216). It is more or less impossible that these characters were all so obliging to the narrator, and that he happened to know and report it. He does not invite his audiences to investigate the basis of his knowledge. Like his contemporary historians, he is saying in effect: "Trust me: I know what happened and especially *what it means for us.*"

Historical works, then, along with treatises on ethnography and geography, cosmology, physics, biology, and astronomy/astrology, were part of the bulwark of accepted authority in antiquity. We can only be astonished at the degree to which Roman leaders and authors deferred to such recognized sources for their information about the cosmos, foreign peoples, and distant places. Although more accurate information was often available from merchants and travelers with first-hand experience, lacking the prestige of the established authorities those sources were generally ignored.<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding occasional outbreaks of the empirical impulse, chiefly among sub-elite specialists, deference to authority would remain the dominant mode of learning throughout the Middle Ages; only a Copernican revolution could overthrow it.

Although none of the rivals Josephus mentions in *War's* prologue has left traces for comparison with his own work, the legacies of Nicolaus of Damascus and Justus of Tiberias help to put this issue of authority in relief. Nicolaus was a highly educated and skillful writer, whose public career had given him unmatched access to the most powerful men alive, and so to the best information of his time.<sup>19</sup> Yet, although sections of his 144-volume *Universal History* have survived in relative plenty (via the 10th-century *Excerpta* of Constantine Porphyrogennitus), nothing remains of his detailed accounts of Judea or King Herod, though he wrote copiously of both; we know these parts only through what Josephus—the new authority on Judean matters—adapted from Nicolaus for his own purposes.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>On the deference to authority in all spheres of knowledge see Mattern, *Rome*, 24–80; C. R. Whittaker, *Rome and Its Frontiers: The Dynamics of Empire* (London: Routledge, 2004), 63–87.

<sup>19</sup>The standard account remains B.-Z. Wacholder, *Nicolaus of Damascus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962).

<sup>20</sup>A concise survey of Josephus's *Nachleben*, including the insightful contrast with Nicolaus and Justus, is in S. Bowman, "Josephus in Byzantium," in *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity* (ed. L. H. Feldman and G. Hata; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 362–85; for this point, 367.

Justus of Tiberias was evidently also a talented writer, as secretary and protégé of King Agrippa II (*Life* 40, 336). He too must have had access to precious information, and modern scholars would be delighted had his work survived. Yet Justus found little uptake among the Christian authors who preserved Josephus, and his works, though they seem to have treated Judean affairs almost exclusively, disappeared entirely.<sup>21</sup> We know about Justus only through Josephus's criticisms of him, and those criticisms would echo through the ages. Early on, Justus lost the competition for prestige: once Josephus was regarded as *the authority* for Judea, his rival had no chance. Eusebius's ready endorsement of Josephus's moral critique of Justus (*Hist. eccl.* 3.10.8) shows that the contest had long been settled by the fourth century. The ninth-century Patriarch Photius claims to have read Justus's work, and briefly indicates its contents (*Bibl.* 33), although he devotes nearly half of this entry to restating with enthusiasm Josephus's dismissal of Justus. By the time of the *Suda Lexicon* in the tenth century, the entry on Justus merely cites Josephus as a sufficient repudiation (I.450: "He took it upon himself to compile a Judean history and write certain commentaries; but Josephus exposes this fellow as a fraud, for he was writing history in the same period as Josephus").<sup>22</sup>

Plainly, the very different evaluations of Josephus and his near contemporaries by the Christian writers whose judgments determined what would be copied for survival had little to do with any critical investigation of their accounts. It had everything to do with a presumed *moral* compatibility that was buttressed by Josephus's overwhelming prestige. After the initial boost provided by his Flavian social connections, a curious thing happened to Josephus's legacy. The Judean community declined utterly to show an interest in their famous son. This is the flip-side of the authority question, for no matter how good his *information* might have been, he was—like Phylarchus to Polybius—perceived as morally reprehensible and *therefore* as an *untrustworthy guide* (see already Josephus's response to moral criticism in *War* 3.438–442; *Life* 416, 425). Christian authors took up Josephus's work with enthusiasm, however, precisely because they found him as congenial as his compatriots had found him objectionable. At least a dozen Christian authors of the second and third centuries, from Theophilus of Antioch to Tertullian and Origen, use Josephus as an authority,<sup>23</sup> but they do not explain *why* they credit his works.

Eusebius is important because he not only makes extensive use of Josephus;<sup>24</sup> he also explains why. He introduces him as "the most distinguished of historians

<sup>21</sup>Justus's history may, however, have provided the basis for Julius Africanus's historical schema, which furnished a foundation for many later chroniclers: see Bowman, "Byzantium," 366.

<sup>22</sup>This language (ἐπεχείρησε μὲν καὶ αὐτὸς Ἰουδαϊκὴν ἱστορίαν συντάξαι) closely matches Josephus's descriptions at *Life* 40, 338.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. M. E. Hardwick, *Josephus as an Historical Source in Patristic Literature through Eusebius* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 10, 31, 34, 49, 60.

<sup>24</sup>See S. Inowlocki, "The Citations of Jewish Greek Authors in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Praeparatio Evangelica* and *Demonstratio Evangelica*," (M. Litt. thesis. Oxford University: Faculty of Oriental Studies, 2001). The tenth-century *Lexicon* (entry, "Jesus [Ἰησοῦς],

(ἐπισημότατος ἱστορικῶν) among the Hebrews”<sup>25</sup> (*Hist. eccl.* 1.5.3; cf. 1.6.9). After uncritically endorsing Josephus’s claims to comprehensive knowledge (cf. *War* 1.3), he elaborates that the historian was

the *most renowned* (ἐπιδοξότατος) man of the Judeans at that time, not only with his compatriots but *also among the Romans*, such that he indeed was *honored* by the erection of a statue in the city of the Romans, and the works composed by him were *considered worthy* of [deposit in] the library. (*Hist. eccl.* 3.9.1–2)

Eusebius reinforces Josephus’s *credibility* (πιστεύεσθαι) by endorsing his claims against his rival Justus of Tiberias (*Hist. eccl.* 3.9.3), accepting Josephus’s assurances that such powerful figures as King Agrippa and his family as well as the *imperator* Titus all vouched for the *War*’s accuracy (3.9.10–11; cf. *Life* 361–363). The *Suda Lexicon* will reiterate many of the same points: Josephus was a lover of the truth (φιλαλήθης), who spoke of both the Baptist and Jesus and James, and whose fame led to his being honored with a statue (I.503–504). Josephus’s authority sprang ultimately from the esteem in which powerful Romans had first held him.<sup>26</sup> Here was a Jerusalemite of impeccable social standing before the war, who had nevertheless castigated the Judean rebels, also describing in lurid detail the fall of Jerusalem—thereby seeming to demonstrate the fulfillment of Jesus’ predictions (e.g., Origen, *C. Cels.* 2.13.68–85).

Josephus, of course, had made no connection between the fall of Jerusalem and Christian claims, but it seemed possible to use him in this way: a Judean witness who wrote with unrestrained emotion about the alleged failings and crimes of his contemporaries. His pervasive celebration and defense of Judean law and culture could either be minimized, as it was by Origen, who famously credited him with being “not far from the truth” (*C. Cels.* 1.47; *Comm. Matt.* 10.17), and by Eusebius, or it could be squarely faced and exploited, as it was by the fourth-century writer we know as Pseudo-Hegesippus. This author wrote (*De excidio* 2.12): “However, it was no detriment to the truth that he [Josephus] was not a believer; but this adds more weight to his testimony: that while he *was an unbeliever*, and though *unwilling* that this [the *testimonium flavianum*] should be true, he has not denied it to be so.” Hegesippus felt strongly enough about the authority of Josephus’s *witness* (“an outstanding historian,” 1.1), yet *also* about his being too Jewish, that he wrote a new history of Jerusalem’s fall—now in “truthful” Christian terms.<sup>27</sup> Again, the authority of the new version would rest not in independent investigation of what had happened, but on the combination of moral congeniality and accreditation by worthy (fourth-century) contemporaries. It would take another 1,350 years

---

Christ and our God,” item 229, line 164) identifies Josephus as the historian to whom Eusebius often referred.

<sup>25</sup>For the positive valuation of “Hebrew” in Eusebius, see Inowlocki, “Citations,” 52–64, 112–21.

<sup>26</sup>Hardwick, *Patristic Literature*, 74.

<sup>27</sup>Passages cited here are from the opening paragraph of the work. A concise introduction to Pseudo-Hegesippus in relation to Josephus is A. Bell, “Josephus and Pseudo-Hegesippus,” in *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity* (ed. Feldman and Hata), 349–61.

for the Cambridge mathematician and heterodox theologian William Whiston to press the adoptionist line of Origen and Eusebius as far as actually making room for Josephus within the Christian fold—now as an Ebionite bishop.<sup>28</sup> Either way, Josephus's prestige remained unmatched, even by works such as that of Ps.-Hegeippus, through the Middle Ages and into modernity.

### *Josephus's Authority in Modern Scholarship*

Writers of the modern *Umwelt* manuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would continue to use Josephus as their generic *Companion to the NT*, but their rationale was fundamentally different from that of the church fathers. As the basis for their esteem, Josephus's personal prestige gave way to a conception of *raw facts* and *sources* presumed to be embedded in his accounts.

If it is possible to speak of the Enlightenment as a coherent movement, its defining trait was the repudiation of all so-called knowledge derived from authorities. Common reasoning applied to repeatable observation became the only acceptable way of knowing, in a world now grown up and free of tradition's tutelage.<sup>29</sup> Like other disciplines, history needed rescuing from accrued sacred tradition. Once the clear-sighted critic had burned away the thick patina of clerical orthodoxy, it was hoped, the plain facts of astronomy, biology, physics, geography, and history—for Deists, the very words of God—would impose themselves on honest and neutral thinkers, demanding a new view of the world.

Ancient history did not immediately take up the positive "scientific" logic of the Enlightenment. The *philosophes* of the eighteenth century, in a striking parallel to their ancient elite counterparts, viewed history as but one of their many encyclopedic pursuits, and they shunned specialization in the field as pedantic. Though sometimes diligent in examining sources, they tended to write sweeping interpretative histories accompanied by vigorous moral assessment based in universal principles. In their animus against Christianity they were hardly objective, though they believed their harsh assessments justifiable in the service of truth.<sup>30</sup>

The accommodation of history to the new scientific conception of independent facts came chiefly in the nineteenth century. Historians such as B. G. Niebuhr and Leopold von Ranke insisted, against the Enlightenment synthesizers, on studying the details of particular places, states, and individuals without assuming the normativeness of a universal "natural law," as the Enlightenment had done, and therefore also withholding moral judgment. Their prime directive was to get the facts correct and only afterwards, where possible and with great care, to move

<sup>28</sup>So "Dissertation 1" attached to W. Whiston's ubiquitous 1737 translation of Josephus.

<sup>29</sup>Immanuel Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784) is a classic statement. The opening paragraph declares: "Have the courage to use your own understanding' is therefore the motto of the Enlightenment."

<sup>30</sup>An excellent analysis, with vastly more nuance than I can attempt, is in P. Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 368–96.

up to general statements drawn from these particulars. The momentum in history was moving decisively away from the grand narratives preserved from antiquity, driven by universal principles of nature and morality, toward the atoms thought to constitute the surviving evidence, whether these were found in material remains, in non-literary documents, or in sources distilled from the surviving literary texts (a specialty of Niebuhr).<sup>31</sup>

The scientific turn in history proved its value in the later nineteenth century as thousands of material remains from antiquity were found, cataloged, and interpreted: coins, papyrus documents, funerary and civic inscriptions, and remains of monuments. This gathering of new evidence generated dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference works of hitherto unimaginable quality, considerably refining our understanding of social, cultural, legal, and linguistic variation in antiquity. This fund continues to provide the basis for much of our analysis of antiquity.

A problem, however, was that the new enthusiasm for raw data and particular facts tended to create the expectation that *any and all such data*, once discovered, could be treated in the same way, no matter where they originated—for a fact was a fact. This mood conditioned also the interpretation of literary texts, including Josephus's works. The scholar's aim was now to get past the subjective, moralizing interpretation of the author to the facts beneath, or, if not the facts, to the earliest and least corrupted sources behind the extant writings.

Although the presence of two or more overlapping literary sources for an event, or confirmation of certain items by archaeology, made this task of extracting facts appear reasonable, the problem of what to do when only one narrative survived—this is most often the case with Josephus—would take much longer to be recognized as a general problem, with the “linguistic turn” in historical study since the 1960s. In the meantime, because of his intersections at some points with other texts and material remains, Josephus and his hypothetical sources tended to be accepted by default, unless there was a specific reason to reject them: if the passage in question did not seem obviously colored by his “biases.” It was as though Josephus had *inscribed* or *mirrored* the realities of life in some kind of neutral, value-free language.

Such a distinctively modern adoption of Josephus as preserver of facts is embodied in Emil Schürer's *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*. This manual justifiably remains a standard reference work, following extensive revision by the Oxford-based team from the 1970s, if only for its wealth of references. Its stated purpose is to assist the NT scholar in relating “Jesus and the Gospel” to “the *Jewish world* of his time”<sup>32</sup>—not to Josephus's narratives. Given Schürer's heavy reliance on Josephus, it is remarkable that his introduction fails even to mention the man by name, let alone the credentials or fame—or the

---

<sup>31</sup>See G. G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), 3–123—with valuable correctives to Ranke's familiar image in North America.

<sup>32</sup>Schürer-Vermes, *Jewish People*, 1:1.

statue!—that had so impressed his ancient and medieval users. The modern historian implies rather that he is dealing with *facts in themselves*, and not with the messy problems of a human personality and bias. We are in a completely different world from that of Eusebius, though both authors depend crucially on Josephus's works.

Schürer's introduction, for example, already contains a number of statements that he presents as facts, though they merely reword Josephus. This continues throughout the work, as a few random instances will illustrate. "Antipater was now all-powerful at court and enjoyed his father's absolute confidence. But he was *not satisfied. He wanted total power and could hardly wait for his father to die.*"<sup>33</sup> "But Sabinus, *whose conscience was uneasy because of the Temple robberies and other misdeeds, made off as quickly as possible.*"<sup>34</sup> "His [Philip's] reign was *mild, just, and peaceful.*"<sup>35</sup> All this is Josephus, not fact. How can we in the twenty-first century know about such internal motives and moral qualities, which we would hesitate to ascribe even to living politicians about whom we have much more independent information? Schürer's positivist method made it seem acceptable to treat Josephus's gripping stories as though they provided data. He did not explain *how* he made this transition from story to history, or indeed whether he recognized that a transition was involved.

In Schürer, then, we see the quiet transmogrification of an artistic story into fact. Such handling of Josephus as an information portal drove the entire NT-backgrounds industry through the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For example, the many scholarly biographies of King Herod before Peter Richardson's 1996 study—Schalit is a partial exception—were to a large degree paraphrases of Josephus: thoughts and motives attributed to the king by Josephus, for the sake of a compelling first-century story crafted for a Roman audience, were assumed by scholars to reflect the monarch's actual mental world.

Two particularly striking examples are the popular 1964 book by the scholar who translated Josephus's *War* for Penguin, G. A. Williamson's *The World of Josephus*,<sup>36</sup> and Cleon Rogers's 1992 reference work *The Topical Josephus*, with the telling subtitle: *Historical Accounts That Shed Light on the Bible*.<sup>37</sup> In each

---

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 1.324.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 1.332.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 1.339.

<sup>36</sup>Boston: Little, Brown, 1964. Williamson describes the Judean-Roman war in ostensibly factual terms: "On the other [Judean] side was a motley host, torn by dissension and bloody strife, and led by rival self-appointed chieftains lusting for power . . ." (p. 17). Yet this merely translates Josephus's distinctive, thematic lexicon of *στάσις*, *λησταί*, and *τύραννοι*. Or again, Gessius Florus was "heartless, dishonest, disgusting; he filled Judea with misery, accepting bribes from bandits" (p. 145). Williamson is not about to accept everything Josephus says, but his opening critical questions reflect the limits of his skepticism. Are Josephus's narratives, he asks, "as objectively true as we would wish them to be? . . . Is it within our power to separate the true from the false, to distinguish the sober statement from the gross exaggeration?" (p. 21).

<sup>37</sup>Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992. Rogers cites Josephus's assessment of Herod's military virtue (*War* 1.230) and proceeds to "demonstrate the validity" of this assessment—by

case the author takes over Josephus's language bodily, presenting it as though it were a factual record—along with the usual cautions about biases and the need for skepticism.

Although many scholars are more cautious, this is usually a quantitative rather than qualitative difference: they simply doubt *more*.<sup>38</sup> Few hesitate to reproduce as facts those passages they consider unproblematic, overlooking problems such as Josephus's structures and diction. The series *Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* (CRINT) is a partial exception, for it includes expert essays by Attridge<sup>39</sup> and Feldman<sup>40</sup> that at least point toward important aspects of Josephus's artistry. But these essays have little discernible effect on the rest of the collection.

## Problems with the Traditional Approach: Two Case Studies

### *Pontius Pilate in Judean War*

In spite of its evident appeal and ubiquity, this approach to Josephus is fatally flawed by its failure to take account of what the atoms that constitute his narratives are: *his* diction, structures, themes, and literary devices. Rather than descending into the pit of abstract theory here, I invite consideration of two case studies, which plainly reveal at least some dimensions of the problem: Josephus's treatment of Pontius Pilate's prefecture and the role of Caesarea in the outbreak of war with Rome. For reasons of limited space, we focus on the accounts in his *Judean War*, with only glances at the later works. Here we are dealing with material that seems "historical," both in the sense that there is little in it of the wondrous or paranormal and in the sense that editorial "biases" do not seem to obtrude in significant ways. Accordingly, these episodes have been largely taken over verbatim into modern histories on the relevant topics.

Pilate is a figure of obvious importance for all students of first-century Judea and Christian origins. He governed Judea for at least ten years, for as many as eighteen or nineteen if Daniel Schwartz is correct.<sup>41</sup> Either way, it was an unusually long tenure, and Pilate's relationships with the local elite decisively shaped

---

citing examples of Herod's valor from Josephus (pp. 18–20). Yet this demonstrates only that Josephus's narrative holds together, not that it reflects reality. The paraphrase of Josephus continues: "When Nero heard the news of Roman losses in Judea, he was inwardly very much upset, even though he outwardly tried to conceal these concerns (*War* 3.1–3)" (p. 121).

<sup>38</sup>An example is the justly influential study by E. P. Sanders, *Judaism, Practice and Belief, 63 BCE–66 CE* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), which, in spite of its corrective virtues and abundant insights, regularly slides without warning between Josephus's story and the actual past: 92, 140–141, 380–385.

<sup>39</sup>CRINT 2.2 (Assen: van Gorcum, 1984): 185–232.

<sup>40</sup>CRINT 2.1 (Assen: van Gorcum, 1988): 455–518.

<sup>41</sup>D. R. Schwartz, *Studies in the Jewish Background to Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1992), 182–217.

Judean-Roman relations there in the period before Josephus's birth in 37. Yet in *War* Josephus relates only two episodes from Pilate's long career in Judea, both of which resulted in "huge disturbances." One concerns his introduction of military standards into Jerusalem, the other his appropriation of temple funds to build an aqueduct for the city (2.169–177). *War's* material is of brief enough compass that I can quote it in full.

[169] After being sent to Judea as procurator (ἐπίτροπος) by Tiberius, Pilatus introduces into Hierosolyma—by night, concealed (κεκαλυμμένας)—the images (εἰκόνας) of Caesar, which are called "standards." [170] After daybreak this stirred up a huge disturbance (μεγίστην ταραχὴν ἤγειρεν) among the Judeans. For those who were close to the spectacle (τὴν ὄψιν) were shocked at their laws' having been trampled (πεπατημένων)—for they think it proper to place no representation (δείκηλον) in the city. And [in addition] to the indignation (ἀγανάκτησιν) of those in the city, the people from the countryside streamed together in concert (ἄθροους). [171] They rushed to Pilatus in Caesarea and kept pleading for him to take the standards out of Hierosolyma and to preserve their ancestral [customs] (τηρεῖν αὐτοῖς τὰ πάτρια). But when Pilatus refused, they fell down around his residence, prone (πρηνεῖς καταπεσόντες), and held out (διεκαρτέρουν) motionless for five days and nights alike.

[172] On the next [day], Pilatus sat on a tribunal-platform (ἐπὶ βήματος) in the great stadium and, after summoning the rabble (τὸ πλῆθος) as though truly intending to answer them, gives the soldiers a signal, according to a scheme (δίδωσιν τοῖς στρατιώταις σημεῖον ἐκ συντάγματος), to encircle (κυκλώσασθαι) the Judeans with weapons. [173] As the column was positioned around three-deep, the Judeans were speechless at the unexpectedness of the spectacle (πρὸς τὸ ἀδόκητον τῆς ὄψεως). After saying that he would cut them to pieces if they would not accept Caesar's images (εἰ μὴ προσδέξαιτο τὰς Καίσαρος εἰκόνας), Pilatus nodded to the soldiers to bare their swords (γυμνοῦν τὰ ξίφη). [174] The Judeans, just as if by an agreed signal (καθάπερ ἐκ συνθήματος), fell down in concert, (ἄθροοι καταπεσόντες) bent their necks to the side (τοὺς ἀρχένας παρακλίναντες), and cried out (ἐβόων) that they were ready to do away with themselves rather than transgress the law. Pilatus, who was overwhelmed by the purity of their superstition (δαισιδαμονίας ἄκρατον), directs [his men] immediately to carry the standards out of Hierosolyma.

[175] After these events he set in motion a different kind of disturbance (ταραχὴν ἑτέραν ἐκίνει) by exhausting the sacred treasury—it is called the *corbonas*—on a water conduit; it conducted [water] from 400 *stadia* away. At this there was indignation among the rabble (τοῦ πλῆθους ἀγανάκτησις ἦν), and when Pilatus was present at Hierosolyma they stood around his tribunal-platform and kept yelling at [him] (περιστάντες τὸ βῆμα κατεβόων). [176] But because he had foreseen their disturbance (τὴν ταραχὴν) he had mixed in amongst the rabble (τῷ πλήθει) armed soldiers (τοὺς στρατιώτας ἐνόπλους ἐσθήσιν) concealed (κεκαλυμμένους) in civilian clothes. Having prohibited them from using the sword, but having enjoined them instead to strike with sticks those who had begun shouting, he gives the agreed signal (σύνθημα) from the tribunal-platform (ἀπὸ τοῦ βήματος). [177] Many Judeans were lost from being hit by the blows, but many others from having been

trampled under (καταπατηθέντες) by their very own [people] in the escape. Given the calamity (τὴν συμφορὰν) of those who had been taken, the beaten down rabble (τὸ πλῆθος) became silent.

Although these episodes are widely cited for the facts of Pilate's career, consideration of their literary and historical dimensions should give the historian pause.

With regard to literary characteristics, we first notice that the passage is replete with—is indeed *made up of*—Josephus's characteristic language, themes, and habits of speech. Here we see one of many cases in which the Judeans suffer the calamities (συμφοραὶ) foreseen and established as a major theme in the prologue (1.9, 11, 22, 27; cf. *Ant.* 20.166). Phrases indicating the “baring” of swords,<sup>42</sup> the inclining of necks,<sup>43</sup> the “concerted” movement of the Judeans, their “holding out,”<sup>44</sup> and their determination not to transgress the laws,<sup>45</sup> are characteristically and even distinctively Josephan. In this case, the “disturbance” (forms of which appear 184 times in Josephus) is caused by an equestrian “procurator” who provides the first clear example of a type introduced at 2.117: the governors dispatched to Judea were low-level and unworthy equestrians, in contrast to the distinguished senatorial *legati* who governed Syria (e.g., Varus, Petronius, Quadratus, Cestius). The Judean leaders had unsuccessfully petitioned Augustus to be attached to the *legati* in Syria (2.25, 90–91), who appear in Josephus as trustworthy administrators.

More specifically, these episodes illustrate the Judean virtues outlined in the recent Essene passage—steadfastness and contempt for death (2.138, 151–153)—and also prepare for increasingly important events to follow. The first is the more portentous “images of Caesar” episode when Gaius Caligula orders his legate Petronius to install his statue in the Jerusalem temple. When the people opposing Pilate are threatened with death “if they will not accept” Caesar's image, this language anticipates the order at 2.185. The later passage similarly cites the biblical prohibition of “representations”—this rare word appears only in these two passages in Josephus—and again has the masses willing to die rather than transgress the law prohibiting images (2.195). In the later passage too, the Syrian legate will be won over by the purity of their devotion (2.197–198). Still, being a distinguished leader of senatorial rank, Petronius behaves with much greater wisdom than Pilate, initiating a dialogue with the elite on a separate track from his speeches to the mob (2.199).

The complex of incidents based in Caesarea that Josephus will present as a main cause of the revolt will also be filled with language recalling these episodes: a disturbance (ταραχὴ) caused by a governor (2.266, 296) and calamity (συμφορὰ). The same *dramatis personae* are constantly present: the impulsive

<sup>42</sup>Also at *War* 2.213, 619; *Ant.* 14.463, though not attested before Josephus.

<sup>43</sup>Also at 1.618; 6.224.

<sup>44</sup>Josephus uses this verb a noteworthy fifteen times (exceeded by Diodorus, but more frequent than in other historians); καρτερία is a paramount Judean virtue for him.

<sup>45</sup>Although such phrases are found elsewhere, Josephus's use of them in about sixty-five cases gives frequency much higher than in other writers (compare ten occurrences in Philo).

rabble, the spirited youths, and the notable, principal, or powerful men. Gessius Florus, the later procurator who allegedly ignited the war will, while staying in the Herodian palace in Jerusalem, have a “tribunal platform” brought in to hear the Judeans (2.301), from which he will dispense orders for a massacre by the same auxiliary cohorts (2.308).

As for historical considerations: this introduction of standards reportedly occurred during a single night in Jerusalem, and evoked a massive protest in Caesarea beginning the next day. In *War* Josephus relates very little of what the historian would need to know about the incident’s context and causes, of Pilate’s aims as governor, or the state of relations between governor and governed. *Who* introduced the standards into Jerusalem, and for what purpose? If a military unit escorted them, as one would assume, which one? Had they not carried standards bearing images—normally indispensable to military cohorts—before this? Were these particular standards different in form or unusually offensive (because of *Caesar’s* image)? Did Pilate’s concealment of them, by night, represent an effort to *avoid* giving offense in a necessary military operation or, on the contrary, a plan to humiliate the Jerusalemites by a *fait accompli*? Did his removal of the standards at the end of the story entail also a change of cohorts?<sup>46</sup> And how can human beings remain motionless, unless in comas, for five days and nights?

In *War*, Josephus implies that he should simply be trusted: this was a scandalous disturbance caused by Pilate, which evoked characteristic Judean courage in the face of death, and it happened as he tells it.

The parallel in *Antiquities* 18.55–59 says more, but the additions mainly create further difficulties: “having resolved upon the dissolution of the Judean legal system” (ἐπὶ καταλύσει τῶν νομίμων τῶν Ἰουδαϊκῶν ἐφρόνησε), we are now told, Pilate moved his auxiliary army to winter quarters in Jerusalem instead of their normal base in Caesarea. Previous governors had avoided the provocation of imperial standards in Jerusalem, but Pilate deliberately ignored this by wintering his army there. But if the auxiliary force normally in Caesarea (three, four, or five cohorts?) was moved to Jerusalem, why did Pilate himself remain in Caesarea, still with a sizeable force? His alleged program of abolishing the Judean laws was surely too grand for an equestrian *praefectus*, inconceivable in the context of Roman-provincial relations,<sup>47</sup> and described in language suspiciously reminiscent of the events that provoked the Hasmonean revolt (2 Macc 2:22; 4:11; 4 Macc 5:33). Such language is used elsewhere in Josephus only of Julius Caesar’s resolve to abolish *Roman* democracy and law (*Ant.* 19.173) or Gaius Caligula’s attack on Judean laws (19.301); Pilate was not in this league. If Pilate did have such ambitions, how is it that neither the hostile contemporary writer Philo nor the gospel writers mention such an assault, and Josephus himself passes over it in

<sup>46</sup>Cf. C. H. Kraeling, “The Episode of the Roman Standards at Jerusalem,” *HTR* 35 (1942): 263–89, esp. 265, 271–73; H. Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 79.

<sup>47</sup>See C. Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

*War*, where he presents the “procurators” in the darkest of colors? Further, having the cohorts winter in Jerusalem with their standards was a rather subtle and doubtful way of achieving such a purpose. Again, if the icon-bearing standards were the cause of such outrage, how does one account for Philo’s contemporary story that Pilate aroused popular indignation by his introduction of *aniconic* shields into Jerusalem (*Legat.* 299–305), which Eusebius (*Dem. ev.* 8.122–123) and many scholars conflate with this episode? And if Pilate had such a plan to abolish Judean law, why does he end up calming the masses by removing the *images*, but not the wintering army (*Ant.* 18.59)? Josephus’s narratives are opaque with respect to all such underlying realities.

However one resolves such problems, the disturbance caused by the aqueduct project must have been entirely different, in historical terms. Building such a conduit (*War* makes it fifty miles long; *Ant.* 18.60 quietly halves the length) would have required at least a year, more likely two or more, and imagining the historical realities involved is exceedingly difficult. A new aqueduct of any significant length was a mark of prestige and a major practical benefit for the fortunate city, but notoriously expensive to build. Financing typically required a combination of imperial grants, community funds, and private donations. In the provinces the Roman governor had the decisive role in arranging finances for such projects: gathering donations and community funds (possibly encouraged by a partial rebate of tribute), seeking the emperor’s approval, commissioning engineers to design and lay out the aqueduct, and possibly requesting help from the imperial *fiscus* (cf. Pliny, *Ep.* 10.90).<sup>48</sup>

Such real-life considerations remind us how very little Josephus has disclosed in his highly stylized description of Pilate’s aqueduct. Was it in fact Pilate’s initiative to build this conduit, or was it that of the Jerusalem leadership, or of a prominent citizen, or some sort of joint effort? Given that these water systems required professional planning, because of the strict technical requirements concerning elevation and grade, *who designed and built the aqueduct?* Archaeology reveals that Jerusalem’s aqueduct system was complex, dating from different periods.<sup>49</sup> Which part(s) did Pilate build? Was his contribution, indeed, a completely new structure, an extension of existing structures, or a repair project? Did Pilate or the local leaders also arrange for private donations, in the usual way, aside from the resort to the temple treasury that sparked the demonstrations? (Even if the temple treasury was exhausted, as Josephus claims, it may well not have covered the entire cost.) Who if anyone mediated Pilate’s raiding of temple funds? Did he storm the temple with a cohort of soldiers? Josephus does not say he did, and we might have expected him to do so in such a hostile portrait of Pilate if he had known of such a thing. It seems more likely that some unnamed temple officials cooperated

<sup>48</sup>On the usual procedures see P. Leveau, “Aqueduct Building: Financing and Costs,” in *Frontinus’ Legacy: Essays on Frontinus’ de aquis urbis Romae* (ed. D. R. Blackman and A. T. Hodge; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 85–101, esp. 91.

<sup>49</sup>See D. Amit, J. Patrich, and Y. Hirschfeld, eds., *The Aqueducts of Israel* (Portsmouth: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2002), esp. A. Mazar, “A Survey of the Aqueducts to Jerusalem,” 210–42.

with Pilate, perhaps also joining in the planning, though we cannot know. But if they did, and if we knew the answers to any of these other questions, the picture would look very different.

Possible scenarios abound, any of which could provide the back story to Josephus's impressionistic account. It could be that an intended benefactor died or became insolvent, and the inability to fulfill his commitment forced Pilate to turn to a greater use of community funds, putting pressure on the temple treasury. It is entirely possible that the Roman *fiscus* was involved in some way, even indirectly: by rebating tribute or by contributing technicians, surveyors, auxiliary soldiers, or materials—such as lead. Moreover, at what point in this long process did some groups become disaffected, and why at that point? Was the aqueduct completed, half-finished, or merely in a planning stage? If it was only in the planning or surveying stage, how could the treasury have been exhausted? If it was nearing completion after a couple of years, why did the riots occur only now, and reportedly in a single encounter? Josephus gives the occasion as Pilate's visit to Jerusalem (from his base in Caesarea), but he had to visit several times a year; and if the populace had been enraged, they could always have challenged him in Caesarea as they did in the standards episode. What triggered the protest, and who constituted the upset mob? Was this also an internal protest against the temple leadership for authorizing the project? Were personal squabbles and alliances involved?

On all these important questions, about which the historian would need to have information in order to develop any responsible reconstruction, Josephus is completely silent.

A final problem is the very different nature of these two Pilate episodes, if considered historically. For Josephus as author works hard to help his audience overlook such differences between them, and the historical problems that one might ponder, by assimilating one episode to the other. He wants to present two similar "disturbances" provoked by this unworthy Roman governor. Notice the deliberateness in his parallel structures: both episodes involve life-threatening protests by indignant masses before Pilate and his soldiers, secret plans and signals, encirclements and weapons, a hearing before the governor's tribunal-platform, and potentially fatal consequences.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup>K.-S. Krieger (TANZ 9; *Geschichtsschreibung als Apologetik: bei Flavius Josephus* [Tübingen: Francke, 1994], 32–42) is followed by H. Bond (*Pilate*, 49–62) in arguing that these two episodes in *War* support the narrative aims as follows. The first shows the Judeans peacefully resisting Pilate, with a good outcome; in the second, they respond militantly with fatal consequences. This difference highlights the moral: "either accept Roman rule peacefully and its governors will show consideration or resort to violence and risk certain annihilation at the hands of Roman troops" (Bond, *Pilate*, 56). Both scholars note the different number, configurations, and emphases of the Pilate episodes in *Antiquities* and argue that those stories likewise serve its different agenda. This explanation is perhaps too mechanical, however. Neither response by the Judeans is violent: the first creates a "huge disturbance," with outraged masses streaming into Jerusalem and then Caesarea to protest; the second explicitly has them yelling at Pilate, but there seems to be no reason in the narrative to exclude such abuse from the first story—not enough of a difference, at any rate, to treat the stories as models of two different kinds of behavior.

Josephus reinforces the assimilation by repeating key vocabulary from the first episode in the second (“disturbance,” “indignation,” “rabble,” “prone,” “tribunal-platform,” “surrounding,” “concealed,” “sword,” “agreed signal,” “trampled”). In part, this repetition creates dramatic irony: the concealed standards anticipate the soldiers’ concealed weapons; the trampling of the laws leads to the physical trampling of Judeans; and whereas the Roman forces train hard to remain in close order, the indignant Judean masses move in close order spontaneously. They also instinctively act *as if* by an agreed signal, whereas the auxiliary soldiers really need *their* secret signals to be carefully planned. Not only has Josephus hammered these two stories into a matching pair; he has also assimilated them to his narrative tendencies, everywhere exploiting his own meaning-charged lexicon.

Although such an investigation makes clear the extent to which Josephus controls and constructs his episodes from his language, while neglecting basic historical questions, none of this deterred Schürer or his many followers in the NT-*Umwelt* industry. Schürer has the historical Pilate *begin* his (10- or 18-year?) tenure in Judea with the standards episode simply because it is the first of the two stories in Josephus. He portrays as historical the masses besieging Pilate for *five days and nights* without moving, Pilate’s clever plan and “agreed signal,” the Judeans’ defiance with “bared necks,” the shrieking mob protesting the aqueduct, the concealed clubs, and the merciless beating of the people.<sup>51</sup>

I chose the Pilate episodes for illustrative purposes because they represent a best-case scenario for the historian, since here Josephus is not our only source of contemporary information. We have also Pilate’s contemporary Philo, the trial narratives in the gospels and occasional notices elsewhere in the NT, some coinage from Pilate’s term of office, and the famed *tiberieum* inscription from Caesarea.<sup>52</sup> From all this we can easily confirm a hypothesis that a Pontius Pilatus did govern Judea under Tiberius and that his title was “prefect” rather than Josephus’s “procurator” (unless both titles were simultaneously operative). We also have enough independent and multiform evidence, it seems to me, to declare it more probable that he took up office in 18 than in the accepted year, 26 C.E.<sup>53</sup> But *what Pilate did* during his long stay in Judea, and *why he did it*—in other words, the nature of his tenure as governor, and the very thing that concerns historians most of all—seem impossible to recover, even where we have several lines of independent evidence. For the vast majority of cases, where Josephus provides the sole evidence, we simply have no means of recreating the past that he knew from his surviving works of art.

Reading Josephus’s narratives is very much like watching a well-made film on ancient history: Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* or the BBC-HBO series *Rome*. We

---

Most importantly, Josephus appears to have tried hard to assimilate one story to the other (as argued here).

<sup>51</sup> Schürer-Vermes, *Jewish People*, 1:384–85.

<sup>52</sup> A. Frova, “L’Iscrizione di Pontio Pilato a Cesarea,” *Rendiconti Istituto Lombardo* 95 (1961): 419–34.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Schwartz, *Studies*, 182–217; K. Lönnqvist, “Pontius Pilate—An Aqueduct Builder?—Recent Findings and New Suggestions,” *Klio* 82 (2000): 458–74.

know that the production was well researched and that it is *based on* much reliable information. But it is quite obviously an artistic construction, with every element calculated to contribute to the whole effect. Knowing that real ancient conditions lie behind the production does not help us to know whether or to what degree any particular episode or character has a basis in reality: it sometimes happens that the most compelling parts are pure invention, whereas the least appealing elements have historical roots. But we can know that only when we have access to independent evidence. For Josephus's works, he is in effect the producer, screenwriter, director, set-designer, and sometimes leading actor. Where his artistic production is our only surviving testimony to events, we have no way of turning that work of art by itself into real events.

### *Caesarea's Role in the Outbreak of Revolt*

I have suggested that one function of the Pilate episodes in *War* is to prepare for the complex of incidents in Caesarea that, according to Josephus, played a major role in precipitating the revolt. But the Caesarea complex in *War* also illustrates a different kind of problem for the historian, in its fundamental differences from a parallel account in *Antiquities*.

That these basic differences have been largely overlooked is a symptom of the accepted scholarly approaches to Josephus, which have focused on historical realities behind the text and not on the narrative itself. But if we read the Caesarea stories in *War* and *Antiquities* as distinct narratives, we become aware of Josephus's remarkable freedom as a writer, which in turn ought to prompt sobering questions about the underlying historical realities. The differences are all the more troubling here because in both accounts Josephus claims that the Caesarea incidents were a significant cause or pretext of the war (*War* 2.285; *Ant.* 20.183–184). But what exactly happened, and how did this lead to war?

*War's* account is surprising in many respects, if we read it without assimilation to *Antiquities* (thus, as his first audiences heard it), and it reflects Josephus's disciplined posture as author. Throughout the developing narrative of *War* 2, he usually withholds explicit moral judgment—sometimes to an astonishing degree—as he describes the behavior and human foibles of his actors. The “spirited” or hot-headed elements among the youth are not blamed for behaving as they do, even if their actions produce disaster: they cannot be other than what they are. The same is largely true of the equestrian governors or Syrian legates, or of the mob in general. In the case of Caesarea, the dispassionate tone may cause us to miss what Josephus actually says, especially if we import other and later stories of Judean suffering at the hands of their Greek neighbors.

The Caesarea story opens with a clear statement that the Judeans of that harbor city fomented civil strife, or started a quarrel, or formed a faction (στρασιάζω—a highly charged term in this work) against their Syrian neighbors. Why?

[265] And whereas this war was being fanned every day, [266] a different kind of disturbance involving Caesarea compounded [matters], after the Judeans who

were mixed in [with the population] formed a faction against the Syrians there. For whereas the former reckoned the city to be theirs, saying that its founder had been a Judean (this was Herod the king), the others, though they conceded that the *colonizer* was a Judean, nevertheless insisted that the city was in fact one of Greeks, for in dedicating it to Judeans he [Herod] would not have set up statues and shrines. [267] Because of these [matters] both sides kept contending: their rivalry progressed to weapons, and every day the more spirited ones from both sides were plunging ahead into battle. For the senior Judeans were not able to restrain their own agitators, and to the Greeks it seemed a disgrace to be in a weaker position than the Judeans. [268] These [the Judeans] had the advantage in wealth and strength of [their] bodies, the Greek [side] in protection by the soldiers—for the bulk of the military force there had been enlisted by the Romans from Syria and, just like relatives, they were ready for acts of assistance. (*War* 2.265–268)

Josephus has already authoritatively described Herod's foundation of Caesarea as a port open to the world, marked by colossal statues, temples, theatres, and quinquennial games (1.408–415). In that early description, he says that Herod dedicated the city to the province of Syria, the harbor to sailors along the coast, and the glory of the place to Caesar Augustus (1.414). H. K. Beebe has compellingly argued that Herod offered Caesarea to the Romans as a counterweight to Jerusalem,<sup>54</sup> a place where Greco-Roman culture and trade could flourish and the military could act freely. Such a status is amply confirmed by successive governors' use of the site for their headquarters, and by its "re-foundation" by Vespasian after 70 as *Colonia Prima Flavia Augusta Caesarensis*.<sup>55</sup>

Yet in the present story, Josephus describes a Judean community with many who, "mixed in" among a mainly non-Judean population, have grown so wealthy and strong enough that they boldly attempt to remake the city as "theirs" (οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἤξιουν σφετέραν εἶναι τὴν πόλιν).<sup>56</sup> They build their case on the remarkable premise that Herod, the founder, was after all a Judean (2.266). Josephus withholds judgment on this claim, as also on the Syrian counter-argument that even before Herod the city was Greek, and that in any case Herod himself would not have set up the shrines and statues if he was dedicating it to Judeans—a line of thought that matches Josephus's earlier description quite closely, down to the key verb ἀνατίθημι. The audience should simply know that this is an implausible stretch on the part of the Judeans.

For the Judeans to make the city "their own"—that is, Judean rather than Greco-Roman in character, like Jerusalem presumably—would be a tall order indeed: it would require the dismantling of the most prominent landmarks (the colossal statues on either side of the port entrance, the massive temple to Rome and

<sup>54</sup>"Caesarea Maritima: Its Strategic and Political Importance to Rome," *JNES* 42 (1983): 195–207.

<sup>55</sup>B. H. Isaac, *The Near East under Roman Rule: Selected Papers* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 94–98.

<sup>56</sup>Correctly L. I. Levine, "The Jewish-Greek Conflict in First Century Caesarea," *JJS* 25 (1974), 387: "Thus we find a Jewish community daring to seek control of a Greco-Roman city, an attempt without parallel in antiquity."

Augustus that faced the harbor, all the prominent cultural and entertainment facilities, and countless other structures and established procedures, including the very calendrical basis of city life).

Josephus goes on to describe the hostilities that resulted from this bold attempt: in his narrative, the Judeans are the main instigators.

[269] It certainly was a concern of the prefects to check the disturbance: constantly arresting the more belligerent [men], they would punish them with lashes and chains. But the sufferings of those who were arrested did not produce a turnaround or anxiety in those left behind; rather, they were provoked even more toward civil strife. [270] On one occasion, when the Judeans had been victorious, Felix went into the marketplace and directed them, with a threat, to withdraw. When they did not comply, he sent his soldiers against [them] and did away with<sup>\*57</sup> a great number, whose property was then also plundered.

It is *their* leaders who cannot restrain their own factionalists or agitators (στασιασται); the Greek side, embarrassed to be considered weaker than the Judeans, reacts to the provocation (2.267). Josephus claims, however, that the Judeans enjoyed both superior wealth and greater physical vigor (2.268).<sup>58</sup> This general statement is supported by the first example of fighting that he gives (2.270): the victorious Judeans can only be stopped by the governor's personal intervention with a military cohort. If we read the preceding sentence (2.269) contextually, it seems that the instigators at this point, whom the city's military prefects are mainly occupied with identifying and punishing, are Judeans.

<sup>57</sup>The asterisk here and in the following translations signifies a present-tense Greek verb translated in the past for best English usage.

<sup>58</sup>"Strength of body" (ἄλκη σώματος) is characteristic of *War's* lexicon (2.376, 476, 580; 4.503; 6.55, 81, 331; 7.232; note also 2.60; *Ant.* 6.21; 17.278). At 2.580 Josephus will claim that strength of body (and exaltation of soul) have allowed the Romans to master most of the inhabited earth. This collocation is also attested, though not common, before Josephus: Euripides (*Rhes.* 382); Diodorus Siculus (2.39.2; 4.26.3; 17.100.5; 18.70.3), and Philo (*Ebr.* 174; *Mos.* 1.259; *Virt.* 46). The plural here (σωμάτων ἀλκή) could be construed either as a claim of greater physical vigor among the Judeans—"the strength of [their individual] bodies," as in the similar constructions at 2.376; 6.331; *Ant.* 6.21—or in the sense that the Judeans's strength consisted in their numerical superiority: they had the advantage of "the strength that comes from having many *bodies*." The parallel account does not help because it mentions only their greater wealth (*Ant.* 20.175). Although Levine ("Conflict," 382–83; 1975a: 22) and Feldman (*Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993], 120) understand the issue as numerical, my translation reflects Josephus's usage elsewhere. The Judeans of Caesarea thus compare favorably to the Germans, renowned for the strength and size of *their bodies* (2.376). Indeed, physical strength on the Judean side is assumed in the later story (2.286), where their youths undertake to prevent construction by a Greek resident near the synagogue—and can only be restrained by the governor's military forces. Further, having a numerical advantage would mean enjoying a majority, whereas Josephus's language ("mixed in" at 2.266) and the massacre at 2.475 suggest a Judean minority, no matter how successful and wealthy it was, as do general considerations related to the decidedly Greek character and constitution of the city.

However that may be, the upshot of the conflicts resulting from the Judean bid is that the governor Felix dispatches embassies from both sides to Nero (presumably in the late 50s), for an adjudication of the Judeans' appeal and the Syrians' rejection of it (2.270): "But since the civil strife was continuing, he selected the notables from both [groups] and sent them as emissaries to Nero so that they could negotiate concerning their rights." This in itself is a striking moment: the freedman governor has enough of a sense that the Judeans might be successful that he, after trying to stop the violence, supports a hearing in Rome. At this point in *War*, Josephus puts the issue in suspension while he continues a chronological narrative of the governors following Felix (Festus and Albinus).

The technique of suspending a story and then returning to announce its outcome is a familiar device in *War*. Although Josephus could have anticipated the outcome at this point (and he does that in some other cases), here he prefers to keep the audience waiting, until Gessius Florus is in office in about 66 c.e. The delay allows him to tie Nero's eventual decision directly to the outbreak of revolt in that year.

So we move forward to 2.284, where we learn that the Greeks of Caesarea were successful, after all, in making their case for their ongoing control of the city. Josephus takes this opportunity to date the onset of war and in the next sentence begins to explain the connection.

(14.4) [284] Now at this point the Greeks of Caesarea, having won from Nero [the right] to control the city, brought back the documentation of the verdict, and the war took its beginning in the twelfth year of Nero's *imperium*, in the seventeenth of Agrippa's kingship, the month of Artemisius. [285] Given the magnitude of the calamities [that arose] from it, it [the war] did not have a worthy justification. Namely: the Judeans in Caesarea, having a meeting [place] beside a site whose owner was a certain Caesarean Greek, tried hard and often to acquire the spot, offering a price many times its worth; [286] but while disdainful of their appeals, with added insult he himself built across the site, constructing workshops. He was thus leaving them a passageway that was both narrow and constrained in every direction. So at first, the more hot-headed of the youths were plunging ahead and trying to hinder construction. [287] But while Florus was restraining these [people] from violence, the powerful [men] of the Judeans, among whom was Ioannes the public contractor, being at a loss, persuaded\* Florus with eight talents of silver to prevent the project. [288] Yet he, being [interested] only in the taking, after promising to cooperate in everything, took [the money], absconded\* from Caesarea to Sebaste, and abandoned\* the civil strife to its own devices, as though having sold the Judeans a license to fight.

(14.5) [289] The next day being the seventh, when the Judeans had assembled in their meeting [place] a certain Caesarean agitator turned over a belly-style [container], placed it beside their entryway, and began sacrificing birds on it. This provoked the Judeans beyond remedy, on the ground that their laws had been outraged and their site polluted. [290] Whereas the stable and mild element considered it proper to retreat to the governors, the factious element, having become inflamed by virtue of youth, were burning for a fight. The agitators among the Caesareans also stood ready—for by a plan they had sent forward the man performing the sacrifices—and so an engagement soon came about. [291] Iucundus, the cavalry commander as-

signed to prevent [this], came forward and took away\* the belly-style [container]; he kept trying to end the civil strife. But as he was proving unequal to the violence of the Caesareans, the Judeans seized their laws and withdrew to Nabata; a district of theirs is called thus, lying sixty stadia from Caesarea. [292] The twelve powerful [men] with Ioannes went to Florus at Sebaste, where they began lamenting bitterly about what had been done and begging him to help, discreetly reminding him of the eight talents. He, however, arrested and confined the men—charging them with removing the laws from Caesarea!

(14.6) [293] At this there was indignation among those in Hierosolyma, though they checked their tempers. But Florus, as if he had signed a contract to fan the flames of war, sent to the temple treasury and extracted\* seventeen talents; he had pretended that [it was] for Caesar's needs. [294] Confusion immediately began to grip the populace: they ran together into the temple and with piercing shouts kept calling upon the name of Caesar, begging him also to free them from the tyranny of Florus. [295] Some of the agitators had screamed the most shameful insults and, carrying around a reed basket, were demanding bits of change for him as though he were destitute and needy. He was not put off from his love of money by these [insults], but was all the more driven by rage to pursue wealth.

[296] At the very least he should have gone to Caesarea and extinguished the fire of the war beginning from there and disposed of the causes of the disturbance—for which [task] he had indeed taken compensation. Instead, he charged against Hierosolyma with an army of both cavalry and infantry, so that he might do his deeds with Roman weaponry, and strip the city through [the use of] anxiety and threats.

This part of the story also deserves fuller consideration than we can give it here. But the gist is that, notwithstanding Nero's decision, the Judeans of Caesarea continue to try changing the facts on the ground to their advantage. Namely, they establish a meeting place adjacent to some land owned by a Greek, and then attempt to buy up that land from him at many times its face value. This confirms the impression established at the outset of superior Judean wealth. The Greek, however, is uncooperative—for the understandable reason, we soon learn, that he has purchased the property *in order to develop it*. Indeed, he soon builds workshops right across it, no doubt now (in the story) partly out of spite at the Judean attempt, and this leaves the Judeans a very narrow passageway to enter their meeting-place.

Although Josephus again withholds comment on either side's motives, this is an impressively even-handed description. It is not often observed that, if the Greek was being inconsiderate in building so close to the edge of his land, that problem can only have arisen in the first place if the Judeans had built *near to the edge of their* land, perhaps—as the narrative implies—with the firm expectation of buying up the adjacent parcel and having a larger combined space, in which their meeting place would be more central. Josephus describes the resulting animosity as the predictable result of normal squabbles: one side provokes the other; the other responds with spite.

Following the pattern already established, it is the younger Judean men who at first try to interfere with construction on the Greek's land, as young men are

wont to do, while their elders prefer to gather a massive sum of money (eight talents of silver) for an attempt to bribe the governor to intervene on their side and simply stop the building by his authority (2.287)—not because this course of action is right (or wrong), but because it is the kind of thing that should work. The governor declines to do so, not because he is above bribery, but quite the opposite: he pockets the money but then conveniently leaves town. Josephus remarks that it is as though he had sold the Judeans a license to fight; they continue to be the main agitators to this point. Throughout, however, Josephus continues withholding the expected “bourgeois” moral judgments.

And so it goes. The conflict rapidly escalates, particularly after a young Greek agitator (this is the first time we meet one) is dared by his comrades to overturn one of the Greek storage jars near the Judeans’ land (therefore near the narrow pass they must use to enter their building) and begin sacrificing a series of birds. The Greeks know that this will provoke a fight, and the youths on both sides have at it. An auxiliary cavalry prefect arrives and tries to stop the commotion—by snatching away the Greeks’ makeshift altar—a practical and disinterested intervention aimed at ending the present provocation, without regard for the larger issues. Some of the Judean leaders are now worried enough to take their Torah scrolls and leave for nearby Nabatene, while a delegation heads to Florus in Sebaste to tactfully remind him of the bribe they have paid. He, in his insouciant greed, charges them with having removed their law scrolls from the city!

Only now, as all of the stock character types come to interact, do we begin to understand the connection between these seemingly minor and local Caesarean events and the outbreak of war. According to Josephus, it all boils down to the low character of the Roman governors (an ongoing theme of *War*), in this case Gessius Florus. There are no heroes in this narrative: everyone behaves badly—or at least, as people always do behave. It is the central task of a governor, however, to manage tensions, by careful cultivation of the local elites on all sides, and thus to keep a lid on things. Because Gessius was in Judea mainly to improve his material situation, however—a characterization that would come as no surprise to upper-class Romans—he ignored this most basic duty and, on the contrary, allegedly *undertook to fan the flames of war as a means of diverting imperial attention from his own crimes*. In Caesarea he found a local but potentially virulent conflict, which he could exacerbate through studied neglect, and in which he could be sure to involve the Jerusalemites. Although the citizens of the mother-city had otherwise determined to check their indignation over Caesarea (2.293), he egged them on by first plundering the temple for seventeen talents, and then pursuing a reckless course of diplomatic sucker-punches, provocation, and violent reprisal at every opportunity. Tensions in Caesarea will also lead to a massacre of the Judeans there, which in turn will spark violent Judean raids on all the Greek cities of the coast, the Decapolis, and southern Syria, which in turn will generate massacres of the Judean populations in those cities (2.457–498). That entire complex of hostilities will finally demand the intervention of Cestius Gallus (2.499–458), whose defeat by Judean rebels will create the unstoppable conditions for war. So Josephus claims, and it is a riveting story.

Even this brief sketch will suffice, I hope, to show how pointless it is to characterize Josephus's *War* by simple slogans: that he wrote as a Flavian lackey or mouthpiece, or to absolve himself and his class from war guilt, or to blame the revolt on a handful of "rebels." Such captions do not represent the complexity and multi-layered nature of the narrative. As he makes clear in the prologue, the basic ethos of the *Judean War* is that of a tragedy: the story abounds in suffering, sorrow, calamity, lament, and wailing caused by fortune's unpredictable turns and reversals, but in which context people usually act according to type, from familiar motives. It is a tragedy without heroes. Incidentally, the story brings out the subordinate themes of Judean strength and gubernatorial malfeasance, among others.

The parallel account in *Antiquities* must be treated even more briefly. It will suffice here to point out the very different character of the story. In this later work, the whole episode of the attempted land purchase, with its serious consequences and serviceability to Florus as a vehicle for provoking revolt, is absent. So Josephus must take an entirely different tack.

The *Antiquities* version also has two parts. The first, recalling the *War* counterpart, concerns the Judeans' bid for "primacy" (20.173: *πρωτεύειν*) over the Syrians of Caesarea, which again leads to violence.

[20.173] And now civil strife arose among the Judeans inhabiting Caesarea, against the Syrians in the same place, concerning equality of citizenship rights. For, whereas the Judeans were asserting their primacy on the ground that the founder of Caesarea had been their king, Herod, a Judean by ancestry, the Syrians conceded the point about Herod but insisted that Caesarea had formerly been called Strato's Tower, and that at that time there had been not a single Judean inhabitant. [174] When the prefects in the area heard these things, they seized those responsible from both sides and tortured them with beatings, and thereby suppressed the disturbance for a while. [175] But the Judeans who were in the city, made confident [or daring] by their wealth and on that account holding the Syrians in contempt, kept slandering them, expecting to provoke them to anger. [176] These [the Syrians], while inferior in resources were feeling courageous because most of those doing military service there under the Romans were either Caesareans or Sebastenes, and so for a while were also using abusive language against the Judeans. And then they began throwing stones at each other, until many were injured—on both sides, but still the Judeans would win.

[177] When Felix observed that this rivalry had become a sort of war, he sprang forward and appealed to the Judeans to stop; when they did not comply, he armed his soldiers and sent them out against them. He did away with many of them, though he took more alive, and sent [soldiers] to raid some of the houses belonging to those in the city, which were full of goods. [178] Now the more reasonable and preeminent of the Judeans became alarmed for themselves and appealed to Felix to recall his soldiers with a trumpet-call, and spare them for the sequel [or spare what they had left], and give them [a chance for] regret at what had been done. And Felix obliged them. . . . [A report follows on factional strife among the chief priests in Jerusalem.] Thus did the violence of the [chief priests'] troublemakers prevail over all justice. [182] When Porcius Festus had been sent by Nero as successor to Felix, those who

were prominent among the Judeans living in Caesarea went up to Rome, bringing accusations against Felix; he certainly would have faced retribution for his crimes against the Judeans if Nero had not yielded to the persistent appeal of his [Felix's] brother Pallas, holding him in the highest regard at just that time.

In this *Antiquities* account Josephus heightens the Judeans' confidence and also its corollary, a powerful disdain for their Syrian-Greek neighbors: from their position of greater wealth, the Judeans hold the poorer Syrian population in contempt and keep slandering them in the hope of provoking a fight (τῷ πλούτῳ θαρροῦντες καὶ διὰ τοῦτο καταφρονοῦντες τῶν Σύρων ἐβλασφήμουν εἰς αὐτοὺς ἐρεθίσειν προσδοκῶντες, 20.175). When this behavior eventually succeeds in provoking violence, Felix intervenes with troops to stop the Judean instigators (20.177).

At this point the story departs markedly from *War's* account. Here, the Judean leaders of Caesarea fully admit their error, begging for pardon and a second chance (20.178: καὶ φείσασθαι τὸ λοιπὸν αὐτῶν δοῦναι τε μετάνοιαν, 20.178), which the procurator graciously grants them. In *Antiquities*, as far as the literary audience knows this marks the end of the Judeans' quest for primacy in Caesarea. There is no need for an embassy to Nero, as in *War*, because the matter has been forcibly settled by the governor.

Just as *War's* sequel, concerning the land dispute exploited by Felix, has no parallel in *Antiquities*, so the later work has a sequel that is not only absent from *War 2*, but completely changes the picture created there. Namely:

[183] Furthermore, the prominent Syrians in Caesarea persuaded Beryllus—he was Nero's tutor, entrusted with the administration of Greek correspondence—by giving him a vast sum, to request a letter from Nero canceling the Judeans' equality of citizenship with them. [184] So Beryllus made his appeal to the *imperator* and succeeded in getting the letter written. This furnished the causes of the bad things that followed for our nation: for *when the Judeans of Caesarea learned* what had been written, they engaged all the more in civil strife against the Syrians *until indeed they ignited the war*.

*Antiquities* relates that, soon after the arrival of Felix's successor Festus (in ca. 60), the Syrian Caesareans, apparently continuing to resent their humiliation by their Judean neighbors, send their own delegation to Rome. This embassy prevails upon Nero's secretary<sup>59</sup> to secure from him an annulment or cancellation (ἀκυρόω) of the already existing Judean equality (*Ant.* 20.183–184: παρὰ τοῦ Νέρωνος αὐτοῖς ἐπιστολὴν ἀκυροῦσαν τὴν Ἰουδαίων πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἰσοπολιτεῖαν), and it is this decision by Nero, which comes already during Festus's term in the early 60s, that will be a major cause of the war. That is because it prompts the disappointed Judeans to greater aggression against their neighbors (20.184): “when the Judeans of Caesarea learned what had been written, they engaged all the more in civil strife against the Syrians until indeed they ignited the war” (πυθόμενοι γὰρ οἱ κατὰ

<sup>59</sup>For Beryllus, see M. Griffin, *Nero: the End of a Dynasty* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1984), 32, 46, 55.

τὴν Καισάρειαν Ἰουδαῖοι τὰ γραφέντα τῆς πρὸς τοὺς Σύρους στάσεως μᾶλλον εἶχοντο μέχρι δὴ τὸν πόλεμον ἐξήψαν). We should apparently understand that, since the Judeans have recently aimed at primacy in Caesarea, with a corresponding loss of Syrian standing, this retaliatory revocation of their existing political standing naturally inflames them all the more (20.183–184).

The basic differences of content and chronology between the Josephus's stories ought to be the starting-point for historical analysis. Did Felix authorize a delegation to make the case for Judean primacy in Caesarea before Nero? Did Nero delay his decision by several years (perhaps until Poppaea's death in 65), finally rejecting the Judean case when Gessius Florus was governor? Did the Judeans nevertheless press on with trying to acquire larger community holdings in Caesarea, causing a fierce backlash that Florus would later exploit to conceal his crimes? So *War* claims. Or was an initial Judean bid for primacy immediately cut short by Felix because of the disorders it generated, and abandoned by the Judean leadership? And was this resulting ill will the basis for a successful secret maneuver by the Syrians of Caesarea, during Festus's term in Judea, to have Nero revoke Judean rights in the city? Was this revocation of Judean equality a major cause of the war? So *Antiquities*.

These differences have been more or less ignored by commentators, who tend to see only trivial variations of language in describing the same reality, and so pick and choose elements from each story for a composite "historical" picture.<sup>60</sup> So Lee Levine (emphasis added): "With but few exceptions Josephus's account is *limited to a narration of events* and the two sources *basically agree*."<sup>61</sup> Or Aryeh Kasher: "Theoretically speaking, the dispute was founded on two interrelated questions, which could actually be considered as two sides of the same coin: Which of the two parties deserved the status of *primi inter pares*, in the framework of the legal and organizational-political equality (termed *isopoliteia* by Josephus) which had prevailed in the city since its foundation by Herod?"<sup>62</sup>

No doubt the confusion arises in part from Josephus's reference to ἰσοπολιτεία at the very beginning of the Caesarea cluster in *Antiquities* 20 (173), followed by explanatory γάρ and an account of the Judeans' bid for primacy, which in turn sounds like the first part of *War*'s story, to which it is assimilated by scholars. But ἰσοπολιτεία is not used in *War*, because the issue does not arise there—not, at least, as something *lost* by the Judeans of Caesarea.<sup>63</sup> Only in the second *Antiquities* episode does ἰσοπολιτεία arise explicitly.

<sup>60</sup>E.g., Schürer-Vermes, *Jewish People*, 1:465–66.

<sup>61</sup>Levine, "Conflict," 380.

<sup>62</sup>A. Kasher, *Jews and Hellenistic Cities in Eretz Israel: Relations of the Jews in Eretz Israel with the Hellenistic Cities During the Second Temple Period (332–70 CE)* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1990), 254.

<sup>63</sup>Conflating the two accounts would require, among other things (some problems are noted in Schürer-Vermes, *Jewish People*, 1:467 n. 45), that Nero's agreement to *deprive* the Judeans of equality (*Ant.* 20.183–84) was somehow tantamount to turning down their request for control of the city (*War* 2.284). But the verb used of Nero's response to Beryllus's intercession in *Antiquities* (ἄκυρόω) normally, and always elsewhere in Josephus

Two readings of the ἰσοπολιτεία theme in *Antiquities* 20 appear most plausible. The more obvious one is that Josephus announces the general theme in the opening topic sentence (20.173), and then narrates a balanced account of two communities each trying to displace the other: the Judeans first attempt to remove Greco-Syrian equality in the city, but consequently, thwarted in this aim, suffer a corresponding loss of their own rights. Given that the abstract noun appears only in this story (20.173, 183) in all of Josephus's thirty volumes, we should hesitate before investing the term with any precise legal significance; he need only be offering a general category for the competition over rights. He does not mention it in the first *Antiquities* section because what the Greco-Syrians have is more than equality—it is a Greek city—just as he does not mention “primacy” in the latter half (because it was not something the Greeks needed to seek). In favor of this reading is the elaboration of Judean hostility toward the Greco-Syrians in the former half: by upping the ante in this way, and having the Judeans actively abuse their neighbors in their bid for supremacy, Josephus prepares for a compensatory move on the Greco-Syrian side.

The problem with this reading is that ἰσοπολιτεία is, after all, not mentioned in the former half but is attached explicitly only to the Judean side in the second part of the story. This circumstance suggests another reading, namely: in the topic sentence (20.173) Josephus is only letting the audience know *in advance* where the story will end up, with a Judean loss of equality in Caesarea. In the former half he supplies a background story to explain how that result came about:<sup>64</sup> in seeking *primacy* the Judeans overreached and ended up losing even what they had.

The technique of announcing an outcome and then filling in a longer or shorter back-story is characteristic of Josephus. But the difference between these

---

(*Ant.* 11.17; 14.216; 18.304), refers not to the denial of a request but to the *overturning or cancellation of an existing decree* or decision—a ψήφισμα, δόγμα, or ἐντολή. In the Caesarea story of *Ant.* 20, the verb cannot mean that Nero turns down a Judean petition for primacy because the Judeans themselves have voluntarily abandoned that bid already under Felix; Nero is responding to a contrary appeal from the Syrians. The Judean delegation after Festus's arrival (*Ant.* 20.182) sets out to accuse Felix of general maladministration; Nero does not hear an appeal for primacy from them.

<sup>64</sup>The technique of announcing a theme long before he develops it, like that of suspending a conclusion, is characteristic of Josephus. Most obviously, the prologue to *War* (1.10–11, 24) claims that the war was caused by internal civil strife, led by “tyrants.” Yet *War* 1 does not deal with such matters, and even bk. 2 hardly mentions tyrants as it charts the many causes of the war. Civil war and tyranny only become important after the middle of the work (midway through bk. 4), with the death of the chief priests who had been directing affairs, and especially from bk. 5. They do not govern the entire narrative, even though they appear as guiding themes in the prologue. Also in some particular episodes Josephus provides a topic sentence that does not match the main story immediately following, but only its final outcome (e.g., Pilate's generation of a “disturbance” at 2.175 [where the immediate sequel is about his building of the aqueduct, which secondarily created a disturbance]; the claim of Pharisaic and popular opposition to John Hyrcanus, grounded in jealousy over his success, at *Ant.* 13.288 [though in the story that follows, he is the Pharisees' devoted disciple, and only as a result of Sadducean machinations does he eventually find himself in conflict with them and the masses, at 13.296–98]).

two readings is not great: it involves only the question whether Josephus intends his headword ἰσοπολιτεία to apply to both halves of the *Antiquities* account or only the latter. Irrespective of that decision, the story is clear enough: an aggressive but unsuccessful bid by the Judeans of Caesarea to make the city Judean is eventually countered by a successful Greco-Syrian scheme to remove their political standing in the city altogether. What lies behind this in concrete terms is a tantalizing problem, but unanswerable from Josephus's highly schematic narrative. Crucial for the purposes of this chapter, however, is the simple point that in *Antiquities* Josephus retells the story of Caesarea, and how it became a flash-point in the build-up to war, in a completely different way from the story in *War*. Whatever else we want to say about this matter, we cannot deny that he exhibits breathtaking freedom as a narrator to redraw stories with new personnel, dates, locations, causal connections, and outcomes.

Failure to recognize this technique has led scholars both to homogenize the two different parts of the story in *Antiquities* 20, overlooking essential elements of the first part, and to conflate all of this with *War* 2. This peculiar hybrid has in turn produced considerable speculation about the historical meaning of ἰσοπολιτεία in Caesarea,<sup>65</sup> along with a strong tendency to see the whole complex as but another example of Judean suffering at the hands of hostile neighbors. Yet one of the few points of strong agreement between *War* and *Antiquities* is Josephus's insistence on the aggressive nature of the Judean bid for primacy, based on superior wealth and strength.

From the Caesarea complexes I would like to draw two points relevant to our theme. First, Josephus's narratives are much more interesting *as narratives* than is usually assumed—not least because he so effectively combines vivid characterization and emotional impact with restraint in moralizing. This is not ideological work, but a rich and multi-layered pragmatic-political history, portraying the aims, virtues, and failings of all those on all sides who contributed to the Judean war with Rome. Heroes and villains are few, as the bulk of the narrative charts

---

<sup>65</sup>In one study ("Conflict," 384; but cf. his *Caesarea under Roman Rule* [Leiden: Brill, 1975], 22–23, 29), for example, Levine insists that the Judeans cannot have had equal civil rights in the first place, as "annulment" of them presupposes, because "the Judeans were demanding some such recognition, and it was this quest [*sc.* for ἰσοπολιτεία] that brought on the hostilities in the first place." But this confuses the two parts of *Antiquities*' story: in the first part the Judeans were not initially seeking equality, but rather (as Levine also observes) *primacy and control*; when they later have their equality canceled, that is the result of a separate action on the part of the Syrians, long after they have given up their bid for primacy. Kasher ("The *Isopoliteia* Question in Caesarea Maritima," *JQR* 68 [1977]: 24; *Hellenistic Cities*, 202) challenges Levine by arguing that that the Judeans of Caesarea had already been granted separate but equal political status by Herod, not as part of the main *polis*, but as a *πολιτευμα* under their own laws. He cites the labels that Josephus uses for the notables, dignitaries, and leaders of the Judean community there as proof of the existing *πολιτευμα* ("*Isopoliteia*," 18–19). But such terms are ubiquitous in Josephus and not sufficiently technical to inform us about the specific historical situation here. For further discussion see the essays in T. L. Donaldson, ed., *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Caesarea Maritima* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2000).

ordinary human foibles and their unintended consequences. Josephus's latitude in rewriting the same events combines with his absolute freedom over the initial structure, content, and diction, as we saw in the Pilate episodes, to create a truly artistic production, for which he is producer, director, screen-writer, set designer, narrator, and occasional actor.

Second, this narrative richness only exacerbates the problem of getting behind Josephus's narratives to real historical persons and events. To this problem we now return, with the material considered above as grist for the mill of reflection on method.

## Reflections on Historical Method

### *Standard Approaches*

How *does* one, then, reach behind Josephus to historical reality *where he is our only "source"* for the phenomenon in question? We shall return briefly to the different problem of doing history where multiple sources overlap. But where Josephus provides our sole access to events, as is most often the case with first-century Judea, four standard scholarly approaches to the extraction of factual information have dominated the field: (1) efforts to winnow or distil a factual residue from Josephus's narratives; (2) extrapolation of general reliability from archaeologically verifiable items; (3) exploiting apparent contradictions, doublets, and "seams" to isolate or even reconstruct Josephus's own sources; and (4) applying the same principle of contradiction to identify items that seem inimical to Josephus's literary aims, which he must therefore have included not from literary bias but because they actually happened. I offer a comment on each method before summary judgment.

1. The vast majority of scholarship that uses and cites Josephus opts for a simple winnowing method. Underlying this procedure are two assumptions: (a) that material created or influenced by Josephus's dreaded biases must never be mistaken for fact. But (b), since his manner of writing was to collect facts, like self-contained nuggets or gems, and to surround them with his biased commentary, the commentary can be lifted or evaporated off to leave a factual residue. This project can only be justified, however, by an extremely weak and inadequate apparatus for identifying "bias": usually, one excludes only what is patently aggrandizing, with respect to Josephus or his patrons, along with the miraculous or bizarre. Otherwise, as we see with Schürer and his many imitators, the narrative is simply cut from the "literary" column and pasted into the "historical," and phrases such as "Josephus reports that . . ." (if present at all) become the functional equivalent of "It happened thus. . . ." The cases we have examined, however, demonstrate that Josephus's investment in the most seemingly pedestrian stretches of his narrative is much deeper than this conventional procedure allows.

2. Many archaeologists are bullish, so to speak, on Josephus's stock as an accurate reporter. Their expressed reasoning is that the correspondence between what they find in the ground—in the south-west corner of Herod's temple mount, at Caesarea, Masada, Herodion, reinforced and breached walls at Gamala and Iotapata—and Josephus's description of the same sites requires us to admit that he is a fairly accurate historian.<sup>66</sup> This verdict, however, reflects category confusion. If a modern historian inquires into the physical layout of coastal Caesarea and its harbor, say, then we have *independent evidence* available in Josephus and archaeology, but the archaeology is decisive. If our question is about events described in Josephus's narrative, however—whether the masses streamed from all over Judea to surround the governor's residence in Caesarea, remaining motionless for five days and nights, or whether Felix dispatched embassies to Nero to settle the Judeans' bid for primacy—archaeology has nothing directly to say about the matter. In principle, it is always possible that an artifact will be found that documents a particular person's actions. But this almost never happens for first-century Judea, where the recovered sites, epigraphy, coins, and papyri clarify only general conditions, and the personal names they produce are often hard to connect with those in literary texts. Thus, even if Josephus had written something akin to a historical novel, using real settings but *entirely invented characters, plots, and events*, archaeology would still be compelled to give much the same positive verdict on his "reliability."

3. As in most fields of classical and biblical studies, in the study of Josephus's works the half-century from about 1870 to the 1920s was a period in which scholars were fascinated with what must have seemed an exhilarating quest: to recover the sources Josephus used. The underlying logic of this enterprise was that most ancient authors, certainly Josephus, could better be described as compilers or anthologists than as creative authors. In Josephus's case, given prevailing views about the normativeness of rabbinic Judaism, it was assumed that an Aramaic-speaking Pharisee (as he was almost universally understood to be) was incapable of producing not only the fine Greek language that we see in much of his work, but especially the abundant allusions to classical models of historiography, tragedy, and rhetoric. The source critics reasoned that wherever one encounters anything other than a simple, smooth-flowing narrative (which itself, however, *might* have been borrowed from someone else if it is too smooth)—where we see repetition of vocabulary or doublets in content, a change of vocabulary for the same object, concentrations of *hapax legomena*, a shift of mental or geographical perspective, an abrupt digression or change of subject, an inserted schematic summary, or a reference to some work by the author that we do not possess—all such items likely arise from his (often incompetent) soldering together of sources.

Already in 1920, Richard Laqueur wrote what seemed then to be the obituary for this approach, when he demonstrated that exactly the same phenomena can be

---

<sup>66</sup>E.g., M. Broshi, "The Credibility of Josephus," *JJS* 33 (1982): 379–84; also the essays by D. Syon and M. Aviam in *The First Jewish Revolt: Archaeology, History, Ideology* (ed. A. Berlin and A. Overman; London: Routledge, 2002).

found throughout Josephus's conflicting and choppy accounts of *his own career*; in that case, they cannot result from an ignorant compilation of sources. Since Laqueur's time, many of source criticism's underlying assumptions about Josephus's education and worldliness have also been systematically dismantled. For some decades, scholars realized that, however we explain all the complications of his narrative, we must reckon with Josephus as a genuine author. Strangely, however, full-blooded source criticism enjoyed something of a mini-revival in the early 1990s.<sup>67</sup>

It stands to reason that Josephus, like most ancient and modern writers, was occasionally influenced in his lexical choices or even sentence structures by his sources. But how can we know *where* this happened? And can we hope to reconstruct the source bodily? Those are the questions that seem impossible to answer affirmatively. With the Pilate episodes, for instance, Josephus must have known also this material from oral or written sources, since it happened before he was born. Yet we have seen there that he has fully accommodated the two episodes to his language and themes in general, to the narrative development in *War*, and each story to the other. Sustained examination of the biblical paraphrase in *Antiquities* abundantly confirms that Josephus fashions and controls his material: even though we know in that case that he used the Bible, and although we still have many versions of "rewritten Bible" for comparison, critics cannot yet agree on the kind of biblical text(s) Josephus was using. This is because his reworking is so thorough.<sup>68</sup> The very atoms and molecules from which the story is constructed are Josephan, and if we remove Josephus from the text there is no coherent remainder.

Because he took the same approach throughout his narratives, we can (*a fortiori*) have little hope of recovering otherwise *unknown* sources. Since Josephus's literary art demonstrably involves changes of narrative voice, complexity of character development, calculated repetition of charged language, variation of diction, and diversionary excursus, it seems impossible to devise criteria based on such phenomena for extracting sources. Attempting such recovery would require a sort of literary Heimlich maneuver, performed on someone who has long since digested the item being sought. The result is likely to be neither appealing nor useful.

4. The most far-reaching proposal in recent decades for excavating historical gold from the (allegedly) baser metal of Josephus's narratives hinges on the principle of identifying contradictions or reading against the grain. The logic here is that Josephus wrote to convey certain strong ideas; for example, it is alleged that he wanted to absolve himself and members of his aristocratic peers from

---

<sup>67</sup>Schwartz, *Agrippa I: The Last King of Judea* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1990), 2–3; R. Bergmeier, *Die Essener-Berichte des Flavius Josephus: Quellenstudien zu den Esserentexten im Werk des jüdischen Historiographen* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993).

<sup>68</sup>See the survey by L. H. Feldman, "Use, Authority, and Exegesis of Mikra in the Writings of Josephus," in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. M. J. Mulder and H. Sysling; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), 455–66.

complicity in the war, insisting that it was driven by a mere handful of rogue actors. Since Josephus would not invent material at odds with his purposes, any material that contradicts his aims is likely to be there *because* it is historical, included because he could not in good conscience avoid mentioning it.<sup>69</sup> In relation to the war against Rome, some scholars believe that they can learn from Josephus things that he did not intend to say, through a kind of cross-examination of our long-dead writer. Using him against himself, they challenge his claims and thereby reconstruct a more adequate historical reality.<sup>70</sup>

For a detailed exploration of this method, please see chapter 4 in this volume, “Contradiction or Counterpoint?” The main problem with it is that it must reduce Josephus’s complex narrative to a sort of slogan or thesis, against which “contrary” evidence may be especially valued; but if the narrative is filled with demonstrably deliberate and artful tensions, the rationale for such a procedure collapses. Reconstructing the real past is not as simple a matter as positing Josephus’s thesis or “position” and then finding things that contradict it.

### *General Considerations*

To speak more generally, all these efforts to wring facts from Josephus overlook two fundamental problems: the nature of language and the nature of history. As to the former: it seems obvious that, with the possible exceptions of mathematical and musical notation, there is no such thing as neutral language. We may come close with single-word questions (Height? Eye-color? Age?) and answers (180 cm, blue, 50). But as soon as we begin to use sentences, we must interpret; we cannot simply mirror phenomena as experienced by all participants from all perspectives. This is as true of the television Evening News (perhaps more insidious because less widely recognized) as it is of Josephus, though in Josephus’s case the problem should be especially clear. There is therefore no prospect of converting any narrative into a simple reflection of real events. To do so would require a kind of alchemy: making make one sort of thing into something else entirely. Or, to return to the image of Josephus as producer, writer, director, set designer, and sometimes actor: trying to extract the real Pilate from Josephus’s narratives would be much like trying to extract the real Commodus or Marcus Aurelius from Ridley Scott’s film *Gladiator*. In both cases we know that the work of art we are watching has a basis in past reality, but unless we have independent evidence concerning the real figures and events, we cannot get beyond the art, to know whether the characters portrayed really existed or to what extent they matched

---

<sup>69</sup>The principle that “incidental” evidence, out of keeping with a source’s general aims, is for that reason more valuable, is discussed in R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 256–82; M. Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (trans. P. Putnam; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 61. But these historians observe that such incidental evidence is usually exposed by a second, independent line of evidence.

<sup>70</sup>M. Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome AD 66–70* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 20–21; J. J. Price, *Jerusalem under Siege: The Collapse of the Jewish State, 66–70 C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 33, 186.

the reality. It is no less misguided to draw facts from Josephus than it would be to approach the screen at a showing of *Gladiator* and hope to reach out and touch a real character.

An even more basic problem is that the standard approaches mistake the character of history. We know about the human past in two principal ways: through what has been handed down to us as grateful but passive recipients, through *tradition*, and by the active and disciplined pursuit of our questions about the past, irrespective of whether any group saw fit to transmit information, which is to say through *history*. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries hosted much debate about the true nature of history: whether it is best pursued according to biographical, political, social, economic, social-scientific, or narrative (postmodern) programs. However one resolves those issues, what distinguishes all history since Herodotus applied the word for investigation or research (ἱστορίη) to the past is the authoritative position of the historian: the one who determines the questions, gathers evidence, develops and tests working hypotheses. Unlike tradition, which has a sociological function in preserving group memories and values, history begins with a historian's problem, the careful examination of relevant evidence in situ, and then the generation and testing of possible hypotheses. To the extent that we imagine ourselves called upon to declare one piece of evidence—Josephus or Tacitus or Augustus's *res gestae*—reliable or unreliable, we are shirking the work of history to engage in a more or less critical traditionalism. In its academic context, history is a form of *scientia* or *Wissenschaft*, the methodical pursuit of a problem. Declaring any ancient writer historically reliable or unreliable as such (or partly reliable, etc.) is in this context meaningless.

Thus, a fixed chasm exists between Josephus's artful portraits of Pontius Pilate or Caesarea, which belong to a much larger narrative, and the specific questions we might have about the length of Pilate's term in office, his involvement with Roman personalities and politics under Sejanus, or his aims and policies in Judea. We pursue our questions by articulating them as precisely as possible, gathering the evidence that bears on the problem, and producing hypotheses. The most probable hypothesis will be the one that best explains how the range of surviving evidence came into being. Where we enjoy independent lines of evidence, especially if one line involves material remains, we may entertain some hope of resolving modest questions.<sup>71</sup>

Where we have only one *narrative* source, however, and no other evidence can be brought directly to bear, we have an insurmountable problem. The best explanation of Josephus's narratives will normally be Josephus's interests as author and artist, beyond which we cannot reach. Speculation based on hunches about seeming incongruities has no place to gain traction, to move it beyond speculation. Only where we have a second or third independent narrative that overlaps in significant measure can it become a meaningful exercise to test a hypothesis concerning the lost reality that produced those different artifacts. Even in Pilate's case, where we do have at least three (depending on how one counts the gospels)

---

<sup>71</sup>See the discussion attached to n. 53 above, on Pilate's term in office.

independent literary portraits—in Philo, Josephus, and the gospels—each one may be so thoroughly accommodated to its narrative context that the problem of the historical Pilate remains intractable. If Pilate's term was as long as eighteen years, the snippets provided by the ancient authors appear paltry indeed; we need only compare the difficulty of figuring out the real President of the United States or Prime Minister of Britain, for whom we are overwhelmed with a daily flood of information.

It might be objected to the model of historical investigation outlined here that it seems to entail an assumption of objectivity or neutrality on the part of the *modern investigator*.<sup>72</sup> If we reject the notion of finding facts in ancient authors, why do we think that our own narratives will be any less freighted with our assumptions, values, and language games? For my part, however, I see no connection between understanding history as investigator-driven, evidence-based, and argumentative—what I have argued for here—and any such illusion of conceptual or linguistic neutrality. What distinguishes our historical work from ancient historical narratives is *not* its neutrality. It is rather that history for us takes the form of argumentation, not authoritative narrative. Our written work is in the nature of reporting on historical experimentation: outlining the problem, the evidence, the possible hypotheses, and the results, so that others may work through the reasoning process with us. When our historical work is done we may dare to produce narratives from it, ultimately, but these must still be supported at each point by the results of specific investigations. Because *our aim*—and here we differ fundamentally from a Thucydides, a Josephus, or even a Herodotus—is to invite others to retrace the analysis that has led to our conclusions, we must write in a publicly accessible way, avoiding highly charged idiosyncratic or emotional language that draws from our personal authority and cannot be shared among critical international audiences.

This is far from any claim to neutrality: the point is rather that, in our unavoidable (but unashamed) particularity of style and expression, we seek nonetheless to use a discourse that is as open as possible to the language worlds of others, that offers as many points of connection as possible with other intelligent critics as they reexamine our evidence. In publishing, we invite critical reviews, which are in any case sure to follow. In our conception of history, appeals to our own character or personal trustworthiness (*ethos*), or attempts to elicit specific audience emotions (*pathos*) as a means of persuasion, should have yielded more or less entirely to *logos*-appeals.

## Conclusions

I have tried here to probe the unquestioned status of Josephus as unrivalled authority for the history of early Roman Judea. In general, I have argued that history ought to be no respecter of such authority; in particular, that coming to

---

<sup>72</sup>One recent example of the criticism is Hedrick, *Ancient History*, 17–22.

terms with the content of Josephus's narratives makes clear their limitations as mirrors of episodes in Judean history. We must not rely on Josephus, *not* because he is any more "unreliable" than any other ancient writer but because, like all of them, he crafts a work of art. His work may be relied upon to fulfill its own aims, but not as a window to real events. We cannot rely on Josephus (or Tacitus or others) because historical problems that we define for investigation can only be pursued and resolved, if they *can* be pursued and resolved, by evidence that we identify, gather, and control—in the sense of being able to check it. Where Josephus provides our only account(s) of episodes in Judean history, we still know nothing about them, but only *that* he said what he said. The default posture of the historian about the underlying events must be agnostic, in advance of a disciplined investigation.

So far my conclusions are antagonistic to long-prevailing methods used to study Josephus. To end on a more constructive note, I wish to suggest three more promising approaches. First, where Josephus's narratives overlap with material evidence or with other literary accounts (as in the case of Pilate's career), it becomes at least plausible to formulate certain kinds of historical problems for which independent lines of evidence exist to be explained and, therefore, which we may hope to solve with some greater measure of confidence.

Second, although the content of particular episodes lay entirely in Josephus's gift, the larger portrait he paints of Judean society must have been one that seemed realistic to someone of his status, background, and temperament. The institutions, groups, and general social conditions that he portrays must have been broadly amenable to his interpretations. This is so for two reasons. First, it defies belief that, given the countless changes and contradictions in specific points over his thirty-volume corpus, he could have sustained a purely imaginary background world. Second, Josephus would have opened himself to pointless criticism from his many contemporaries who also knew general conditions in Judea if he wholly manufactured the basic scenic elements. Still, this is only to say what we might say of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*: that it authentically conveys many general conditions and certain values from the author's perspective. The problem arises if we wish to press any particular element of the general picture, in the absence of independent support.

Josephus's most direct usefulness to the historian, finally, may lie in territory that is not part of his traditional use at all, but in which we are beginning to make strides. A Roman citizen and resident of the capital throughout his literary career, this author of thirty volumes is not only the most prolific extant writer from Flavian Rome; he is also the only surviving historian from those fateful decades. From a wide variety of archaeological (numismatic, epigraphical, papyrological, and monumental), literary (poetic, rhetorical, biographical, and later historical), and prosopographical evidence, we enjoy a fairly nuanced picture of many aspects of Josephus's lived environment in Flavian Rome, though large gaps remain—not least concerning the expatriate Judean community at that time. Since both the broad Roman context and a large number of specific phenomena are available to us, and since Josephus wrote in the first instance for immediate audiences in

Rome, everything he writes is potentially valuable evidence for the life of a Judean aristocrat in Flavian Rome. Since every sentence is a calculated transaction between this author and his Roman audience, we can in principle, with a measure of plausibility provided by supporting evidence, hope to understand better the specific historical phenomena that his author-audience exchanges represent.

Josephus thus becomes, along with such figures as Plutarch and Dio Chrysostom, a rich source of insight into Roman-provincial relations under the principate, and the community of foreign elites in the capital. The value of his narratives may lie less in what he *writes about* than in what he actually *says*: his language, its implicit assumptions, and its likely effects. Without losing their enormous value as narratives about Judea (both for their general picture and for specifics that may be combined with other lines of evidence), when contextualized as products of Flavian Rome Josephus's works invite also many new kinds of historical questions and hypotheses. The following two chapters endeavor to develop this line of investigation.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> See also S. Mason, "Flavius Josephus in Flavian Rome: Reading on and Between the Lines," in *Flavian Rome: Culture, Image, Texts* (ed. A. J. Boyle and W. J. Dominik; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 559–89. Not to be neglected is also the world of the Greek statesman under Roman rule, to which Josephus belongs in some measure. This is the theme of two essays I have forthcoming: "Of Despots, Diadems, and *Diadochoi*: Josephus and Flavian Politics," in *Writing Politics in Imperial Rome* (ed. W. J. Dominik and J. Garthwaite; Leiden: Brill, 2008), and "Josephus, the Greeks, and the Distant Past," in *Antiquity in Antiquity* (ed. K. Osterloh and G. Gardner; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 2008).