Chapter 1

The Use and Abuse of Josephus

In modern English, when we speak of “using” people, we often mean abusing them—exploiting them for some selfish benefit while disregarding their personal integrity. I believe this is precisely what has happened to the legacy of Flavius Josephus in the nineteen hundred years since he lived: he has been widely used but little understood and seldom appreciated as an intelligent author. And this exploitation has come at the hands of both religious and scholarly communities. The last four decades have brought some welcome changes, however, and a major goal of this book is to convey the significance of those changes to the NT reader. Let me explain.

Most of the thousands of books that were written in the ancient world did not survive into the Middle Ages, let alone into the modern world. In the absence of paper, printing presses, and photocopiers, it was not a foregone conclusion that any given book would live beyond its author’s own generation. Publication of books was in general the prerogative of a small and literate elite. Books were often published (“made public”) in oral form, by recitation before a group of interested friends. Book manuscripts, on papyrus or occasionally parchment1 rolls, were relatively rare because they had to be copied individually by hand—usually the hand of a wealthy man’s slave. Libraries and book-sellers existed, but they, too, were few and far between. Therefore, only those books that enjoyed a lively readership or some sort of official

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1Paper made from wood pulp was not introduced into the Western world until the late Middle Ages. Papyrus, its ancient precursor, was made from strips of the papyrus reed, laid side by side and pressed together in double thickness.
sponsorship could remain accessible. Only such committed readers would invest the necessary effort to have lengthy manuscripts copied and recopied.

Initially, Josephus owed his literary survival to sponsorship by the ruling family: the Flavian emperors Vespasian (69–79 C.E.), Titus (79–81), and Domitian (81–96). Although his *Jewish War* was probably not commissioned by them, as we shall see, after its completion Titus endorsed it and arranged for it to be made public (by copying? *Life* 360–362; *Ag. Ap.* 1.50). Since Josephus's favor appears to have continued throughout Domitian’s reign (*Life* 428–429), we may suppose that his later works enjoyed the same friendly treatment. Eusebius knows a statue of Josephus in Rome (*Hist. eccl.* 3.9.2), which might confirm Josephus’s continuing imperial support. In any case, this initial boost from the ruling family would have ensured that his works were copied in public *scriptoria*\(^2\) and maintained in imperial libraries for some time, perhaps until the decline of the empire.

What, then, enabled Josephus’s works to persevere beyond the collapse of the empire? The decisive factor was the Christian church’s appropriation of the Jewish historian’s writings. Two famous church leaders in particular, Origen (d. 254) and Eusebius (d. 340), cited Josephus extensively in their writings and thus popularized his works in Christian circles. By the time the structures of the Roman empire were seriously faltering in the late fourth century, Christianity had risen to become the predominant religion in the state, and Christians had long since adopted the Jewish historian Josephus. It was the church, with its own infrastructure, that would rise from the ashes of the empire to preserve the Greco-Roman heritage. So the church’s attachment to Josephus assured him an ongoing role in Western tradition.

\(^2\)A *scriptorium* was an ancient copying room for the mass production of books. A reader would stand in front of a group of scribes and read aloud, slowly, from the master text. The scribes would listen carefully and copy what they heard. Needless to say, this technique, which remained in effect until the invention of the printing press in 1454, could result in all sorts of errors, because of sound-alike words or sleepy scribes. That is why the first stage in the scholarly study of any ancient work—Josephus, the New Testament, or Plato—is the “reconstruction” of what the author really wrote, based on a careful comparison of the various scribal copies that have come down to us.
WHY JOSEPHUS’S WRITINGS WERE PRESERVED

But why were Christian authors so attached to Josephus? Already by the late second century C.E., some Christian writers had become interested in the famous Jewish author for several reasons. First, his writings provided extraordinary background information for the reader of early Christian writings, especially the gospels. Many of the characters and places mentioned incidentally in those works are described by Josephus at some length, for example: King Herod and his descendants (Archelaus, Antipas, Agrippa I, and Agrippa II); the high priests Annas and Caiaphas; the temple in Jerusalem, where Jesus was arrested; Jesus’ home region of Galilee; the Samaritans and their relations with Judea; and the Pharisees and Sadducees, whom Jesus encountered. For second-century Christians far removed from tiny Judea and its politics, Josephus’s writings had much the same fascination as they have held for every subsequent generation of Christian readers. They filled in a vast amount of history between the close of the Old Testament and the birth of Christianity.

Especially valuable for Christian readers were Josephus’s discussions, brief though they were, of John the Baptist, Jesus’ brother James, and Jesus’ own career. As we shall see, it is almost certain that Josephus’s paragraph on Jesus has been edited by Christian copyists, but the editing was done early on, by about 300 C.E. Later Christian readers assumed, therefore, that the glowing account of Jesus in our versions of Josephus had been written by the Jewish historian himself. Josephus’s descriptions of the Baptist and of James’s death seem to have remained intact. Naturally, these short passages were also highly valued. Since Christianity had not made a major impression on either the Jewish or larger Greco-Roman worlds in the first century, and since no other writers before 100 mention the Christians, Josephus’s few brief notices became important independent testimony to the historical foundations of the church.

It is one of history’s paradoxes that Josephus enjoyed a surge of popularity at the time of the Christian “crusades” in the twelfth century, because of his detailed information about Palestinian geography.

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3 The first Roman authors to mention the Christians were Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, and Suetonius, all of whom wrote in the second decade of the second century.
Beginning in 1096, Christian soldiers marched from all over Europe to wrest Jerusalem from the Muslims, who had administered the city since the seventh century. (The crusaders were ultimately unsuccessful.) Many crusaders took copies of Josephus’s writings with them as a kind of tour guide to the Holy Land. Yet for many of these Josephus-reading crusaders it created no dissonance for them to stop en route and butcher Josephus’s coreligionists—the men, women, and children of Europe’s Jewish communities—for being “Christ-killers.” They were evidently not reading Josephus himself as much as the church’s Josephus, a quasi-Christian. This contradiction between a high valuation of Josephus for his historical and geographical detail and an utter disregard for what he actually says in explanation and defense of Judaism is a consistent feature of the Christian misuse of Josephus.

A second reason for the early church’s interest in Josephus was that he seemed to offer help with the Christians’ pressing social-political predicament. That predicament stemmed from the novelty of Christianity. In a culture that respected what was old and established, Christianity seemed to be a new religion—a contradiction in terms for Roman thinking!—for it worshiped as Lord someone who had been quite recently executed by the Roman authorities, in the humiliating way reserved for trouble-making provincials (crucifixion), and in a backwater province no less. Strangest of all, this new faith had neither a national center nor an ethnic character, unlike the familiar religions of Greece, Egypt, Phrygia, Persia, and Syria. In what seemed to be a most antisocial stance, it even prohibited its members from participating in local festivals on the grounds that those celebrations inevitably involved sacrifice to the traditional gods. And because Christians met in private homes, at night, where men and women greeted each other with kisses and then partook of “body and blood,” all sorts of lurid rumors circulated about their behavior. Just as medieval Christians would later accuse the Jews of sacrificing children at Passover, so the early Christians were charged with promiscuity and cannibalism.4

4 The earliest surviving reference to Christianity by a Roman comes in Pliny’s letter to Trajan concerning the Christians (10.96). Writing in about 111 C.E., Pliny assumes that Christians practice cannibalism and other crimes. A full description of the vices attributed to Christians is given by the character Caecilius in the Octavius of Minucius Felix, 8–10 (early third century). See the first three items under “For Further Reading.”
Josephus was indirectly helpful to the young church on this score because he had faced something of the same animosity toward his nation and religion. Although Judaism did have a national and ethnic base, and though most Greco-Roman authors seem to have recognized the antiquity of the Jews, there was still a fair amount of misinformation about Jewish origins and customs. A large part of Josephus’s concern had been to defend Judaism against charges that it was merely a corrupt derivation of Egyptian religion and that it practiced immorality, including human sacrifice. Especially in his *Jewish Antiquities* and *Against Apion*, he had sought to demonstrate his nation’s long and noble history, to show that its “constitution” espoused the highest standards of morality, and to explain the Jewish belief in “one God only” (monotheism) in a way that would both deflect charges of antisocial propensities and appeal to philosophically minded readers.

All of this apologetic effort was extremely useful to Christian spokesmen. Many early Christians tended to see themselves as the “true Israel,” as heirs to the biblical tradition. The church’s apologists, therefore, were quick to see the value of Josephus’s *Against Apion*, which sharply refuted Greco-Roman attacks on monotheism and abstinence and in turn criticized common morality while eloquently arguing the superiority of biblical ethics and “philosophy.” This work became something of a model for Christian self-representation to the outside world, especially with Origen’s *Against Celsus* (though the title itself was not patterned on Josephus; see chapter 3).5

Without question, however, the most compelling source of Josephus’s appeal to early Christians was his detailed description of the Roman siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. Of all the Christian references to Josephus that have survived from the ancient world and Middle Ages, the passage most commonly cited from his works, next to his reference to Jesus, is one that describes a horrible act of cannibalism during the Roman siege.6 A formerly wealthy woman named Mary, he claims, took refuge with her infant son in Jerusalem during its final days. Faced with starvation because of the scarcity of food within the besieged city, this aristocratic woman took her son and ate him (War

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6 In Heinz Schreckenberg, *Die Flavius-Josephus-Tradition in Antike und Mittelalter* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 186–203, there is a list of known references to Josephus through the Middle Ages.
It may seem peculiar to modern Christians that this grisly episode should have so awakened the church’s interest, but it did. Christian authors cited it even more often than Josephus’s important references to John the Baptist or to Jesus’ brother James. This little story was chosen for illustration in medieval editions of Josephus’s works and was reenacted in Christian plays. Largely because of this brief episode and a few others, Josephus’s book on the unsuccessful Jewish revolt, the Jewish War, was much more interesting to early Christians than his Jewish Antiquities, which contains the references to Jesus, John the Baptist, and James. Some explanation is necessary.

It has been a standard feature of Christian preaching through the ages that the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 was really God’s decisive punishment of the Jewish people for their rejection of Jesus, who had died around the year 30. The earliest Christian sermon that we possess, outside of the NT, is largely a tirade against the Jews for their treatment of Jesus. Melito, bishop (apparently) of Sardis in the mid-100s, declares that the Jewish people and its Scripture became an “empty thing” with the arrival of Christianity and the gospel (Pascha 43); only those Jews who believe in Jesus have any ongoing religious validity. Melito accuses the Jews as a nation of having “murdered” Jesus and asserts that their current suffering (after 70 and a further failed revolt in 132–135) is a consequence: “You cast the Lord down, you were cast down to earth. And you, you lie dead, while he went up to the heights of heaven” (Pascha 99–100).

In the same vein, a work Against the Jews credited to bishop Hippolytus (d. 235 C.E.), declares:

Why was the temple made desolate? Was it on account of the ancient fabrication of the calf? Or was it on account of the ancient idolatry of the people? Was it for the blood of the prophets? . . . By no means, for in all these transgressions, they always found pardon open to them. But it was because they killed the Son of their Benefactor, for He is coeternal with the Father. (Against the Jews 7)

Origen, who taught in the early 200s, pointedly restated the theme:

I challenge anyone to prove my statement untrue if I say that the entire Jewish nation was destroyed less than one whole generation later on ac-

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count of these sufferings which they inflicted on Jesus. For it was, I believe, forty-two years from the time when they crucified Jesus to the destruction of Jerusalem. . . . For they committed the most impiest crime of all, when they conspired against the Savior of mankind, in the city where they performed the customary rites which were symbols of profound mysteries. Therefore, that city where Jesus suffered these indignities had to be utterly destroyed. The Jewish nation had to be overthrown, and God’s invitation to blessedness transferred to others, I mean to the Christians, to whom came the teaching about the simple and pure worship of God. (Cels. 4.22)8

Eusebius, a Christian author of the early 300s, made the same sort of claims in his Ecclesiastical History, which became an extremely influential document for subsequent generations of Christians; his history fixed many aspects of the Christian understanding of history until the modern period. Speaking of the fall of Jerusalem in 70, he asserts that Christians fled the city so that “the judgement of God might at last overtake them for all their crimes against the Christ and his Apostles, and all that generation of the wicked be utterly blotted out from among men” (Hist. eccl. 3.5.3, [Lake, LCL]). Similar sentiments are found in such authorities as Minucius Felix, John Chrysostom, and Augustine, not to mention many lesser figures.

Obviously, Christian fascination with the destruction of the temple and the fate of the Jews was not a matter of merely antiquarian interest. As we have seen, Christians typically—though not universally: there were varieties of Jewish Christianity—saw the “death” of the Jews as the necessary condition for the birth of Christianity. These authors leave no doubt that the church took over the heritage of God’s covenant from the Jews, who then more or less disappear from the scene. This theological interpretation of Jerusalem’s fate explains why Christian authors tended to view the events of 70 as a total or near-total destruction of the Jews, whereas in fact most Jews lived outside of the Jerusalem region by the first century.9 The large Jewish communities of Rome, Alexandria, Greece, Asia Minor, and Babylonia were not physically affected by the events of 70. In those places, and even in Palestine itself after the war, Judaism continued to thrive; hence its vigorous existence today. But the church fathers conjured up the destruction of the Jews for symbolic reasons: to support their contention that God’s grace had passed from

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Judaism to the church. Far from being an incidental event in history, the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans provided a critical foundation for Christian self-understanding.

The common interpretation of Jerusalem’s fall as God’s punishment of the Jews continued to flourish throughout the Middle Ages. By then it had become part of popular Christian culture and not just the property of theologians. From the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, a recurring theme of plays and novels was “The Revenge of Our Lord,” in which the Roman conquest was triumphantly reenacted. Several French communities produced such plays on a regular basis, to complement their “passion” plays, in which the Jews were charged with Jesus’ death. By the time of Martin Luther (1483–1546), the great reformer who initiated what would become Protestant Christianity, the Christian interpretation of Jerusalem’s capture had long been fixed. His tract on “The Jews and Their Lies” reflects the common view: the Romans were God’s instruments, punishing the Jews for their “delusions regarding their false Christ and their persecution of the true Christ.” In that same tract, Luther advocates that Jews be deprived of normal civil rights, that their property and books be burned, and that they be herded together in forced labor camps.

This brief sketch of traditional Christian attitudes toward the Jews and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70, which could easily be expanded, helps to explain why Josephus’s writings, and especially his *Jewish War*, were so popular among Christian theologians. Although the Jewish historian did not make any connection between Jesus’ death and the fall of Jerusalem, his writings provided detailed corroboration of the horrors that befell Jerusalem in the war, which happened to follow Jesus’ death by a few decades. The episode of Mary’s cannibalism was so popular because for Christian apologists it showed the depths to which “the Jews” as a body had fallen as a consequence of their rejection of Jesus.

It was perhaps inevitable that, once Josephus’s works were known, his *Jewish War* would be exploited for details of the Jewish catastrophe. Melito of Sardis probably already knew something of Josephus, for he includes a reference to the cannibalism episode to illustrate the de-

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pravity of non-Christian humanity (Pascha 52). But the pivotal figures in the Christian adoption of Josephus were Origen and Eusebius. Both of these men had traveled extensively throughout the Roman world; both had visited the city of Rome itself, where Josephus’s works were maintained in the libraries; and both lived for some time in Caesarea, the coastal city of Josephus’s native Palestine. Because of these unusual opportunities, both men were able to read Josephus first hand, so they both saw the potential in his works for Christian adaptation.

In addition to borrowing from Josephus for Against Celsus, Origen cites him in his Bible studies on Lamentations, in which he discusses among other things the fall of the Jewish temple. In that discussion, he claims that Josephus had researched the cause of the debacle and attributed it to the Jews’ execution of Jesus’ brother James around the year 62 C.E. This is a considerable distortion. In reality, Josephus’s writings are peppered with various reasons for the city’s fall; any conspicuous violation of the Mosaic law or Jewish custom is a candidate. He does express horror at the unlawful treatment of James (Ant. 20.200–201) but does not isolate this episode as a reason for the destruction. Rather, it is one of a number of infractions, including the bestowal of unprecedented privileges on the Levites (!), that he lists as causes of the later punishment. So Origen significantly misleads his readers in claiming that Josephus attributed the fall of Jerusalem to James’s mistreatment.

In any case, Origen himself pointedly disagrees with Josephus. He criticizes the Jewish historian for not realizing that it was the Jewish role in Jesus’ death, not that of James, that brought about the “annihilation” (as he says) of the Jewish people: “If, therefore, he says that the destruction of Jerusalem happened because of James, would it not be more reasonable to say that this happened on account of Jesus the Christ?” (Cels. 1.47). Evidently Origen distorted Josephus’s account because Josephus’s real explanation of Jerusalem’s fall would not have served his purpose (see below). By pretending that Josephus had isolated James’s execution as the cause, he pulls the Jewish historian into the Christian orbit: at least, Josephus is “not far from the truth” (Cels. 1.47).

It is in support of his claim that Jerusalem fell in retribution for Jesus’ death that Origen cites Josephus’s account of the horrors suffered by the Jews during the war. He dwells in particular on the cannibalism episode, which he sees as fulfilling Lam 4:10 (Fr. Lam. 105). But he also mentions Josephus’s claim that, some months before the destruction,
strange voices were heard in the temple saying, “We are departing from here” (Josephus, War 6.299–300). Origen interprets these voices as those of the angels who supervised the temple activities. He sees their departure as the definitive moment of collapse for the whole temple regime and for Judaism itself (Fr. Lam. 109).

In a similar way Eusebius, who knew Origen’s writings well, used Josephus to bolster his theological interpretation of the fall of Jerusalem. His thesis is that the Jews compounded their guilt after Jesus’ execution by persecuting Jesus’ followers: Stephen, James the son of Zebedee, and others (Hist. eccl. 3.5.2). As a result, he asserts, they suffered increasing calamities. His proof of this claim? “Those who wish can retrace accurately from the history written by Josephus how many evils at that time overwhelmed the whole nation, . . . how many thousands of youths, women, and children perished by the sword” (Hist. eccl. 3.5.4).

Significantly, Eusebius decides to focus his account on the starvation faced by the Jews who were trapped in Jerusalem during the siege, “in order that those who study this work may have some partial knowledge of how the punishments of God followed close after them for their crime against the Christ of God” (3.5.7). To substantiate this very Christian claim, he quotes verbatim several pages from Josephus concerning the misery faced by the Jews during the Roman siege. His concentration on the starvation of the Jews allows him to bring up Josephus’s heart-rending story of Mary’s cannibalism (3.6.20–28). Immediately after this climactic episode (for Eusebius), he concludes: “Such was the reward of the iniquity of the Jews for their crime against the Christ of God” (3.7.1). Here Josephus is thoroughly domesticated to Christian use.

But if the destruction of Jerusalem was punishment for the Jews’ treatment of Jesus, why did it not occur until forty years after the crucifixion? Aware of the problem, Eusebius responds that God suspended his justice for forty years both because of the presence of the apostles, who protected the city by their presence, and in order to provide the Jews with a suitable opportunity for repentance (3.7.8–9). God even sent warnings of the coming catastrophe if the Jews did not repent. These warnings are the omens mentioned by Josephus (War 6.288–309), and Eusebius confidently refers the reader to the Jewish author as his external witness. Of course, Josephus does not connect the omens with Jesus of Nazareth, who does not even appear in the Jewish War.
Eusebius takes over Origen’s distortion about Josephus’s attributing the destruction of Jerusalem to the death of James, but he is bold enough to manufacture the missing passage. We have seen that Josephus did not link the fall of Jerusalem specifically to James’s death, although Origen implied that he did. Eusebius, however, actually quotes Josephus: “Of course Josephus did not shrink from giving written testimony to this, as follows: ‘These things happened to the Jews to avenge James the Just, who was the brother of Jesus’” (Hist. eccl. 2.23.20). Here we witness an astonishing phase in the Christian adoption (and corruption) of Josephus.

Eusebius’s other noteworthy distortion of Josephus arises from his desire to parallel Jesus’ death at Passover with the destruction of Jerusalem at the same time:

It was indeed right that on the same day on which they had perpetrated the passion of the Saviour and Benefactor of all men and the Christ of God they should be, as it were, shut up in prison and receive the destruction which pursued them from the sentence of God. (3.5.6)

The problem with this neat scheme is that Josephus carefully dates the various stages of the war and makes it plain that the temple finally fell in late September (by our calendar, War 6.392, 407), whereas the Passover feast was in the spring. Josephus does note that those who had come for Passover in the spring were trapped in the city when the Jerusalem phase of the war came to a head, and some had to stay for the duration. But several months elapsed between Passover and the final battles, so Eusebius appears to have collapsed the dates in order to strengthen the symbolic connection that he wants to make between Jesus’ death and the destruction of the temple. In his hands, we see Josephus already well on the way to becoming a kind of quasi-Christian because of the support he seemed to offer for Christian claims.

The need to Christianize Josephus becomes most obvious in a free Latin paraphrase of his works written around 370 C.E.11 An unknown author, erroneously thought by some medieval commentators to be the second-century Hegesippus, created a work in five volumes on the destruction of Jerusalem (De excidio Hierosolymitano) out of relevant material in Josephus’s War and Antiquities. But his motive for doing so was that Josephus’s own accounts were not Christian enough. He would

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rewrite Josephus to bring him into closer accord with the church’s position. In his preface, he acknowledges Josephus’s usefulness but claims that he was too Jewish in his outlook. He was:

an outstanding historian, if only he had paid as much attention to religion and truth as he did to the investigation of facts and moderation in writing. For he shows himself to be sympathetic to Jewish faithlessness even in the very things he sets forth about their punishment. (1.1)\textsuperscript{12}

In other words, although Josephus wrote the \textit{Jewish War} to explain the causes of the temple’s destruction, he failed to see the true (i.e., Christian) interpretation. Pseudo-Hegesippus will not make such a mistake:

And so that no one will think I have undertaken a useless task, or one of no value to the Christian faith, let us consider the whole race of the Hebrews embodied in its leaders. . . . (1.3)

The Jewish race, he wants to demonstrate, is “depraved” and has lost its place in the story of salvation. He intends to use Josephus’s account to show what Josephus had not shown, namely, that in the fall of Jerusalem the Jews “paid the penalty for their crimes, because after they had crucified Jesus they persecuted his disciples” (2.12).

A telling example of the way in which Pseudo-Hegesippus’s Christian outlook determines his subsequent narrative is his rendering of a scene in which Cestius Gallus, the Roman governor of Syria, withdraws his troops from the attack on Jerusalem in the autumn of 66, after the very first Roman attempt to quell the revolt.\textsuperscript{13} Josephus had expressed wonder at this withdrawal because (a) if Cestius had pressed the attack, the whole war could have been won then and there, and (b) the Jewish rebels’ victory over the withdrawing Roman troops (whom they successfully ambushed and massacred) gave them a false sense of strength, which emboldened them to prosecute the war more vigorously. As to why Cestius decided to retreat when he was not in peril, Josephus hints that the Syrian commander had been bribed by the governor of Judea, who wanted to see the Jews utterly annihilated (War 2.531). His more religious explanation is that “God, I suppose, because of those miscreants [i.e., the relatively few rebels, whom Josephus despises], had already turned away even from His sanctuary and ordained that that day should not see the end of the war” (War 2.539).

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\textsuperscript{13}I owe this example to Bell, “Josephus and Pseudo-Hegesippus,” 354.
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Pseudo-Hegesippus, however, transforms this account by introducing a Christian theological explanation for Cestius’s withdrawal:

The will of God delayed the imminent end of the war until the ruin could involve much—almost all—of the Jewish race. God expected, I think, that the enormity of their [the Jews’] crimes would increase until, by the heaping up of impropriety, it would equal the measure of his supreme punishment. (2.15)

We find here once again the erroneous claim that virtually all of the “Jewish race” was in Jerusalem during the siege. This assertion can be explained only on theological grounds, for it permits the Christian writer to dispense with Judaism as an ongoing reality. God wiped out the heart and soul of Judaism in 70; the few who remain witness to the truth of Christianity by their homeless suffering. Whereas Josephus himself had spoken from within Judaism, as its passionate spokesman and defender after 70, Pseudo-Hegesippus mined Josephus’s account in order to depict the Jews as a destroyed nation.

To summarize thus far: Josephus’s writings were preserved from antiquity by the Christian church for several reasons. They provided a lot of useful background information, a paraphrase of the Old Testament, a valuable model for apologetics, and even some brief references to key figures in the birth of Christianity. Their greatest attraction, however, seems to have been their detailed descriptions of the atrocities that accompanied the fall of Jerusalem to Rome. Josephus’s account of the war could be used as apparent proof of the Christian belief that the Jews had become God’s enemies by rejecting Jesus and the claims of his followers. Eusebius was critical to the preservation of Josephus for these purposes, for he made the Jewish historian the key external witness for his theological interpretation of history. Other accounts of Judean history and geography were in circulation, such as those by Nicolaus of Damascus and Justus of Tiberias, and some of these survived as late as the ninth century. But when decisions were made then, in part by the patriarch Photius, as to which ancient texts should continue to be copied, it was apparently Eusebius’s glowing endorsement of Josephus that secured him a privileged position.14 His competitors, who lacked the endorsement of such an imposing figure, are known today only in fragments quoted by others (such as Josephus!).

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PROBLEMS WITH THE TRADITIONAL USE OF JOSEPHUS

I hope that the foregoing survey of how and why Josephus’s works were preserved will explain what I mean when I say that the ancient author has usually been abused. He wrote, as we shall see, in order to explain Judaism to outsiders and to demonstrate its virtues in a world that was often hostile. But Christian authors took over his most self-critical work, in which he castigates a small number of Jews for their failure to live up to the standards of Judaism, and turned that work against the Jewish people as a whole, thus exactly reversing Josephus’s intention. His writings were treated not as the production of an intelligent human mind but as a mine of data that could be excerpted willy-nilly to produce a new document such as that of Pseudo-Hegesippus. In Josephus we have a vigorous defender and explainer of post-70 Judaism, and yet his Christian adapters used him to argue that Judaism had been overthrown in 70. His own analysis was barely acknowledged and, where it was, it did not move users. By making him their ally, they grotesquely distorted the very source that they prized for its witness to the truth of Christianity.

To see more clearly the incompatibility of Josephus’s account with these Christian purposes, before we examine Josephus in greater detail, we must present each side in sharp relief. In effect, the Christian claim was that the Jews suffered for being so stubbornly Jewish, that is, for clinging to their ancestral traditions and not responding to the gospel concerning Jesus. Josephus argued what amounts to the opposite position: that Jerusalem fell because some Jews were not faithful enough to Jewish tradition, but rebelled against the national and external authorities ordained by God. Those few untypical and reckless men filled the sacred temple with murder and pollution. Whereas the zealous priest Josephus had been concerned with the scrupulous observance of the laws, his Christian users charged the Jews with failing to abandon those laws in favor of Christian faith.

Although he would not call himself a prophet, Josephus presents himself and his perspective in continuity with the long line of Israel’s prophets—some of whom, such as Ezekiel and Jeremiah, were also priests. They, too, had threatened Israel with punishment, back in biblical times, for its laxity in keeping the divine teaching or
“torah.” Notice how the Old Testament accounts for the fall of the first temple, which was built by Solomon. Jeremiah repeatedly warned of disaster because the people had disobeyed God’s commands. Their crimes included worship of other nations’ gods (Jer 17:1–4) but also, and equally grievous, carrying water jugs and lighting fires for warmth and cooking on Saturday, the Sabbath (17:21–27). In short, the people had not scrupulously maintained the terms of the covenant; these terms occupy the greater part of Exodus through Deuteronomy and include much more than the Ten Commandments. When the disaster finally came in 586 B.C.E., and Solomon’s temple was destroyed, the prophets concluded that it was God’s means of punishing the people for having departed from the worship of the one God of Israel. Ezekiel, Nehemiah, and Daniel all confess that ever since the divine teachings were given to Moses, the people have lapsed from their observance, and that is why Jerusalem and its great temple have been destroyed (Ezek 20:4–44; Neh 9:12–37; Dan 9:4–14). When the Jews were permitted by the Persians to return to their land and rebuild their temple in the late sixth century B.C.E., they naturally took this opportunity as a second chance from God. So they begged forgiveness for past errors and resolved scrupulously to adhere to the divine teachings. They took “an oath with sanctions to follow the Teaching of God, given through Moses the servant of God, and to observe carefully all of the commandments of the LORD our Lord, His rules and laws” (Neh 10:30, NJPS).

In explaining the fall of the second temple, Josephus has largely taken over the model provided by the Old Testament prophets. He wants to portray himself as a latter-day Jeremiah, lamenting the fall of the city and the sins that caused it. Needless to say, the prophets had not mentioned faith in Jesus as a criterion of righteousness, and neither does Josephus. It is the Christian interpretation that introduces a new claim.

This variance in explaining the fall of Jerusalem shows how difficult it is to deduce cause from sequence—to say: “Y came after X;
therefore, Y was caused by X.” There is simply no way to prove such claims to be either true or false. They will be convincing only to those who already believe the proposition being advanced. That is because any number of Xs (here, pre-70 events) might be cited as potential causes. For example, some Romans said that the temple fell because of the wrath of their gods, who were angry at the Jews because of their rebellion against Rome. The second-century philosopher Celsus asserted that the destruction of Jerusalem decisively proved the weakness of the God worshiped by both Jews and Christians; the Roman victory, by implication, proved that the traditional Greco-Roman gods were more powerful and worthy of worship. Note that Celsus also cited the miserable plight of the Christians, who were at that time on the extreme margins of lawful society, as evidence of futility of Christian worship—since their God was unable to create a better life for them. So it was somewhat inconsistent for Christian authors, when the church had finally won imperial recognition and security in the fourth century, to cite the destruction of Jerusalem and the plight of the Jews, which had been quite deliberately worsened by the anti-Jewish legislation of Christian rulers, as proof of Jewish guilt and Christian truth.

Before leaving this matter of the early church’s misuse of Josephus to bolster its interpretation of the fall of Jerusalem, we need to admit that such an interpretation also suffers from serious moral objections. It does so because it depends on a doctrine of collective responsibility, where the collective in question (Jewish identity) is involuntary and inalienable. Thus all Jews of all times and places share the guilt of a very few, who acted two thousand years ago.

First, the criterion is applied to only one party involved in Jesus’ execution, some Jewish leaders. If a Jewish court was involved in Jesus’ crucifixion, it may have had somewhere between twenty-three and seventy-one members—a group small enough, apparently, to fit in the high priest’s home (Mark 14:53; 15:1). But the Roman governor Pilate and his entourage, according to the gospels, also had a crucial share in Jesus’ death. Crucifixion was a Roman (not Jewish) punishment, and

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16 For obvious reasons, Celsus’s writings were not thought worthy of preservation during the Christian Middle Ages. They are known to us only in fragments quoted by Origen in his tract Against Celsus. These are conveniently accessible in Molly Whittaker, Jews and Christians, 185.

17 See the Mishnah (a compendium of Jewish law compiled in about 200 C.E.), Sanhedrin 1:4–5.
Pilate was the one who passed and executed the sentence. His soldiers beat and mocked Jesus, and it was they who hung him on the cross. How then is it that no one has ever accused any Italians, of any generation, of being “Christ-killers,” while the charge has been relentlessly leveled against the Jews? Where are the church fathers’ sermons denouncing Romans? On the contrary, in some Christian traditions Pilate became “in his secret heart already a Christian” and he was credited with addressing a glowing account of Jesus to the emperor.18

Second, the whole concept of collective responsibility is repugnant because it involves indiscriminate revenge: anybody with certain religious or genetic characteristics becomes morally responsible for the actions of any others with those features. Especially in view of the average life expectancy in the first century, which was much shorter than ours,19 it is rather unlikely that any of the Jewish judges who may have been involved in Jesus’ trial were still active when the temple was destroyed in 70. If hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children died in that catastrophe to punish their fathers and grandfathers, how is that just? Although no Jewish magistrate from Jesus’ day was alive when Melito of Sardis preached his Passover Sermon in the 160s, he addressed Israel in the second person as if it had a single corporate personality through the centuries: “You, on the contrary, voted against your Lord. The nations worshiped him. The uncircumcised [i.e., non-Jews] marveled at him. . . . Even Pilate washed his hands in this case. This one you did to death on the great feast” (Pascha 92). Evidently Melito and the later Fathers had forgotten the words of Ezekiel seven centuries earlier:

The person that sins, he alone shall die. A child shall not share the burden of a parent’s guilt, nor shall a parent share the burden of a child’s guilt; the righteousness of the righteous shall be accounted to him alone, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be accounted to him alone. (Ezek 18:20, cf. 2–4, NJPS)

The tenacity of the claim that Jerusalem fell as punishment for “the Jews’” treatment of Jesus, the incredible energy devoted to this matter

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18 See Tertullian, Apology 21.24 (and 5.2); compare the second-century Gospel of Peter 1–24, 46; Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 2.2.1; and the apocryphal Acts of Pilate.

over the centuries, and the Christian lack of interest in the Roman involvement in Jesus’ death call for an explanation. But that would take us too far afield. It is enough for now if we recognize the problem and resolve not to engage in the same sort of polemics.

So far we have seen that the customary use of Josephus by Christian authors has been doubly abusive: first, his material has been wrenched out of its narrative setting, so that his own story has been lost. Second, that material has been used to tell another story—one that he did not espouse. My contention is that readers of the NT need not resort to these traditional devices, which are really cheap tricks, in order to make Josephus’s writings useful. They do not need to rewrite him or baptize him as a Christian. It is a sign of maturity when we stop trying to make everyone into clones of ourselves (whether they be our students, children, or employees) and begin to appreciate them for who they are. We are invariably rewarded when we make the effort to encounter another person in his or her integrity. We need to do the same sort of thing with Josephus. If we will read him as a genuine, first-century Jewish author, with his own concerns and interests, our reading of the NT will be greatly enriched.

JOSEPHUS AND JUDAISM

One would think that, if the Christian transmitters of Josephus had completely ignored his Jewish identity, Jewish readers at least would have noticed and appreciated it. But strangely enough, this did not happen much. Jewish responses to Josephus have always been ambivalent at best because of his personal history.

The key point is that Josephus seems to have abandoned his own people in their fateful hour, in the conflict that would spell the end of the temple and, ultimately (in 135 C.E.), the disbarment of Jews from Jerusalem.20 Sent to Galilee as a regional commander in the revolt, he capitulated to the Romans when they besieged his base at Jotapata. He not only surrendered, but also gave speeches urging his compatriots in

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20 A second major Jewish revolt against Rome, from 132 to 135, resulted in the total destruction of Jerusalem and its rebuilding as a Roman colony called Aelia Capitolina, with a temple to the god Jupiter on the site of the demolished Jewish temple. The Roman emperor Hadrian forbade Jews to enter this city on pain of death.
Jerusalem to do likewise (War 5.114, 360–362). After the war, he was granted Roman citizenship and a generous pension by the emperor, and it was in these circumstances that he wrote his account of the revolt, which includes lavish praise of the imperial family and relentless castigation of the Jewish rebel leaders (though not of the Jews as a whole). Consequently, Jews have traditionally viewed him as a traitor to the Jewish people.

In the coming chapters we shall consider both Josephus's outlook with respect to world affairs and the difficulties involved in reconstructing his personal life from the texts he has given us. It certainly appears from his writings, however, that during the war he was constantly accused by some of his fellow fighters (e.g., Life 261, 284, 302), that he routinely deceived other Jews about his intentions (e.g., War 3.193–201; Life 75, 79, 128–131, 141–142), and that he knew of a principle requiring generals to die fighting (War 3.400; Life 137)—and later felt insecure about his behavior in this regard.

In any event, from the moment of his surrender until his death, Josephus faced relentless hatred from his compatriots. Some tried to have him executed, while others wrote accounts of his wartime behavior that challenged his own self-vindicating portrayal (War 3.438; 7.447–450; Life 425; cf. 40, 336). Understandably, the cozier he became with the Romans—the military conquerors of the Jews—the more detestable he became to his people. And when this Jewish historian was posthumously adopted by the church, which claimed that he had even declared Jesus to be the Messiah—the same church that immediately passed laws restricting Jewish civil rights, relegating Jews to second-class status as “Christ-killers,” and using Josephus to support their claims—his fate was sealed. His name does not appear in either version of the voluminous Talmud, which was finally edited in the fifth and sixth centuries, or in any other early Jewish writing.21

Josephus's perceived cowardice would also prevent him from achieving respect in modern Jewish circles, particularly in the Zionist

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21 A possible exception is a reference in a (fifth-century?) text called Derek Erey Rabba, to a wealthy Jew in Rome, at the end of the first century, identified as “FLSOFOS,” which some have taken as a corruption of “Flavius Josephus.” See Heinz Schrekenberg, Rezeptionsgeschichtliche und Textkritische Untersuchungen zu Flavius Josephus (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 49. Other Greek-speaking Jewish authors, like Philo, likewise receive no mention in rabbinic literature; other factors, therefore, may have contributed to the neglect of Josephus.
movement, which took root in the late nineteenth century and culminated in the creation of Israel in 1948. A nation built on the determination to survive against all odds had no place for someone who could so easily surrender, accept luxurious privileges from enemies, and then serve those enemies’ propaganda aims. Thus Josephus has appeared to many modern Jews, and not a few Gentiles, as the classic self-serving traitor.  

On the other hand, the sheer wealth of historical information offered by Josephus has necessarily commanded at least grudging respect among all those who are interested in either biblical interpretation or postbiblical history. Already in the middle of the tenth century, when Jewish scholarship was flourishing in southern Italy, someone from the region was motivated to translate Josephus’s writings into Hebrew. This version of his War and Antiquities 1–16 proved extremely popular and was itself recopied and translated into several languages. Known as “Josippon,” from a corruption of Josephus’s name, this text was used extensively by medieval Jewish commentators to illuminate their interpretation of the Bible and Talmud.

In modern times too, especially since the capture of East Jerusalem in 1967 and the resultant flourishing of Israeli archaeology, Josephus has become an indispensable guide to first-century Palestinian geography. He has proven particularly helpful on the matter of King Herod’s building projects, which once covered the land and now provide a major focus of modern archaeology. Since this archaeological effort is in part a function of the nationalist agenda (to demonstrate Jewish roots in the land), Josephus has paradoxically become an ally of the Zionist cause. While his personal history is deplored in some Jewish literature, his writings are still valued as unparalleled sources of history.

Josephus’s perceived betrayal of the Jewish people has loomed so large that his obvious devotion to Judaism and enthusiastic defense of Jews against widespread slanders in the Greco-Roman world have received relatively little attention in Jewish scholarship until recently.


24 For a concise statement of Josephus’s importance to the archaeologist, see Louis Feldman, JBH, 434–40.
Whereas traditional Christian readers had disregarded his Jewish perspective because they found it distasteful, Jewish readers often dismissed it as an artificial ploy meant to deflect the hostility that he faced from his own people. In both cases, his fundamental viewpoint was lost to the world.

SCHOLARS’ MISTREATMENT OF JOSEPHUS

Before we discuss Josephus’s writings and outlook, fairness demands a brief consideration of the scholarly mistreatment of Josephus, for until recently the academic community has also tended to wrench Josephus’s statements out of their original context and exploit them for its own purposes.

The intensive historical study of Josephus, as of the NT and early Judaism, took flight in the middle of the nineteenth century. These branches of study were based in Germany, where there was a remarkable awakening of scholarly interest in the ancient world. Professors began to produce massive reference works in their efforts to recover as much information as possible about ancient life and language. Numerous manuals, encyclopedias, lexicons, atlases, and dictionaries appeared, and serious archaeological work was begun in the Mediterranean countries. Although scholars of preceding centuries had already tried to reconstruct the original Greek texts of the NT and Josephus, by comparing the many manuscripts that had survived, scholars of the nineteenth century pursued more disciplined projects along these lines, in the case of the NT with the aid of newly discovered manuscripts.

It was in this atmosphere that Emil Schürer wrote his magisterial text, Lehrbuch der neustamentlichen Zeitgeschichte (1874), which later became Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi (1886–1890). This manual was so influential that it has been updated, translated into English, and reissued in the 1970s. For Schürer, naturally, Josephus’s writings were a major source of information. Yet his method of treating the ancient author was sometimes alarming. He regularly cited Josephus’s isolated statements as if they were “facts” that could be combined with other facts (i.e., statements of other writers or archaeological evidence) to produce a whole picture. For example, Schürer opens his discussion of the Pharisees with a collection of passages from Josephus, combined with fragments from other
sources, and then proceeds to weld these together into a coherent whole. He fails to take into account, however, that Josephus’s remarks can be understood only in the context that Josephus gave them, for words have meaning only in context. Josephus wrote lengthy stories, not digests. If we want to know what he meant to say about the Pharisees, we must read his remarks about them as part of his story, paying careful attention to his use of language. We cannot simply pull them out and combine them with statements from other people who had entirely different stories to tell and who used language in different ways.

Schürer’s method is often called the “scissors-and-paste” style of history. Although everyone today realizes that it doesn’t work, in principle, we all find ourselves drifting into it from time to time. We still see authors, some of whom would insist on interpreting passages from, say, the gospels, within their narrative contexts, ripping chunks out of Josephus and citing them as “raw data” or facts—as if they were the product of a robot and not a real human mind with a story to tell.

Examples abound. First, one commentator argues that, since Josephus mentions “fate” in his discussions of the Jewish groups, and since fate was generally understood in antiquity in astrological terms, as an inescapable and oppressive power, Josephus must be implying that Judaism offers deliverance from fate (as some other religions claimed for themselves).25 A careful reading of Josephus, however, would show that he speaks positively of fate and considers the recognition of it a religious duty.

Second, if they do not pluck out bits of Josephus and assign the bits an arbitrary meaning in this way, scholars often treat Josephus’s narrative as if it were a kind of continuous or at least proportional video coverage of ancient Judea. For example, some recent manuals of Judean history propose that the Pharisees must have faded from public view from about 6 to 66 C.E. because Josephus does not describe their activities during this period.26 Typically, these scholars say that the Pharisees do not “appear” or “are not mentioned” for these six decades, as if there was a vast array of historical literature from which the Pharisees disappear.27 In fact,

27 Grabbe, ibid., 2.476; Sanders, ibid., 386
however, they are chiefly referring to Josephus, who provides the only connected narrative. Leaving aside the question whether the Pharisees truly are absent from Josephus’s narrative at this time, we face the problem that Josephus does not pretend to give a proportional narrative. This is clear enough from the fact that almost four volumes of the *Antiquities* (14–17) are devoted to the reign of Herod (40–4 B.C.E.). But in both the *War* (2.117–183, minus the major excursus 2.119–166) and the *Antiquities*, Josephus gives only a few paragraphs to the years 6 to 66 in Judea, although the latter has considerable material on Roman and Mesopotamian affairs at this time (*Ant.* 18–20). So there is little occasion for him to mention the Pharisees’ activities here. Still, he does insist that the Pharisees remained prominent in society (*Ant.* 18.15, 17). Making deductions from his stylized, episodic narrative as if it presented Judean public annals cannot work.

In effect, then, modern scholars have perpetuated, though in different ways and for their own reasons, the traditional failure to come to terms with Josephus’s narrative.

Another approach to Josephus that has effectively denied his personality is “source-critical” analysis. This method was extremely popular from about 1880 to 1920, when much of the fundamental work on Josephus was accomplished. Now source analysis is an essential part of historical study because it asks the important question: Where did this author acquire his or her information? Since most of the events Josephus discusses occurred either before his lifetime or outside of his personal experience, it is crucial for us to know where he obtained his information if we are to determine its value. But because of the widespread presence of plagiarism in ancient literature, older source critics tended to assume that Josephus took over his sources bodily, simply reproducing them with very light editorial seams. For example, scholars claimed that Josephus took his paraphrase of the Old Testament (in *Ant.* 1–11) from someone else, ready-made, so they had no interest in trying to see what that paraphrase revealed about Josephus’s own thought. If he wrote differently about such figures as Herod the Great in *War* and *Antiquities*, that must have been because he used different sources.

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sources in the two works, not because he changed his mind or had different purposes in writing the two books. Or if he sometimes expressed great admiration for the Hasmoneans, he must have found those passages in a “pro-Hasmonean source,” even though he claimed in his autobiography to be a proud descendant of the Hasmoneans (Ant. 16:187; Life 2). This kind of criticism was taken to such an extreme that even Josephus’s reports about things that he certainly knew firsthand—e.g., his discussions of groups like the Sadducees, Essenes, and Pharisees—were attributed to his sources.

Once again, most scholars today would repudiate such a thoroughgoing source criticism, one that ignored Josephus’s own intelligence as an author; however, those early treatments still wield a considerable influence, and we occasionally find modern scholars falling into the same way of thinking. A recent book, for example, examines Josephus’s descriptions of the Essenes, which have taken on great significance in light of the Dead Sea Scrolls, on the assumption that they are borrowed from other writers. Although he writes an entire book on Josephus’s Essene passages, Roland Bergmeier does not even ask how their language, themes, and contexts contribute to Josephus’s narratives. Imagining that one can identify different sources within the Essene passages on the basis of word usage—but without, by and large, consulting Josephus’s own habits—he wishes only to identify those sources.

Since the late 1960s, a new and much more realistic approach to Josephus has taken root, and it seems to be reinforced with almost every new study that appears. What unifies this newer scholarship is the realization that Josephus was the author of his own literary productions. He wrote with purpose and accommodated his material (extensively borrowed from other sources, to be sure) to his own agenda. He used words, as we all do, in a distinctive way. A team of scholars led by K. H. Rengstorff has now produced A Complete Concordance to Flavius Josephus, which enables us to trace his characteristic vocabulary. His writings can also be searched electronically, by computer. It turns out that he had favorite phrases and themes. Recent studies of his paraphrase of the OT have shown that he carefully worked over the biblical story to serve his larger purposes. From his earliest to his latest writings, his “worldview” remains remarkably coherent.

This is not to deny that Josephus was sloppy at times, that he sometimes went off on tangents, that he contradicted himself in some places and dissembled in others. All of these things are to be expected with an
ancient author of such extensive writings, who had such a controversial past. In my view, they make Josephus particularly intriguing. But none of this excuses us from taking him seriously as a person from another time and place who had something to say about his world.

CONCLUSION

We find ourselves in the peculiar position of being grateful that Josephus’s works survived, while at the same time regretting the primary reason for their survival—as a rod with which to beat the Jews. Josephus himself was a Jew, an extremely energetic spokesman for his nation after 70. Paradoxically, although he was probably the most influential nonbiblical Jewish writer of all time, his intended meaning was not influential at all, with either Jews or Christians. On the contrary, it was completely inverted. Even when the religious maltreatment of Josephus subsided, the poor fellow was largely abused by the academic world, which similarly tended to fragment his writings into little bits of data. As a result it has taken us the better part of two thousand years to begin reading what Josephus actually wrote.

The new willingness to listen to Josephus’s own voice has been greatly facilitated by a new academic atmosphere. Since World War II, Jewish, Christian, and other scholars have begun an unprecedented adventure in cooperative scholarship within university departments of religious studies. This cooperation has meant that we can no longer use as proof things that would convince only our own constituencies, but must discuss history in a public way—with proof that is universally compelling. If we cannot appeal to our own traditions for our interpretations of Josephus, we must finally read what he had to say for himself. When we do that, remarkably enough, we can agree to a large extent about what he was up to.

I hope that the following chapters will begin to show how truly useful Josephus can be for readers of the NT, when we try to engage him as an authentic person with something to say. The next chapter will introduce his life, writings, and world of thought. After that we shall explore particular issues in Josephus’s works that are of interest to NT readers, attempting in each case to relate the passage or theme to his larger concerns.
FOR FURTHER READING

On the earliest Roman impressions of Jews and Christians, see:


On the position of the Jews in Western (Christian) history, see:


On the transmission of Josephus’s writings, the most complete studies are in German, by Heinz Schreckenberg of Münster:


But *JJC* includes a brief summary essay by Schreckenberg in English translation, called “The Works of Josephus and the Early Christian
Church,” pp. 315–24. It also contains several important essays on the Christian use of Josephus, pp. 325–426. They deal with Origen, Josephus’s passage on Jesus, Hegesippus, Josephus in Byzantium, the illustration of Josephus’s manuscripts through the Middle Ages, and Martin Luther. An accessible essay on the Hebrew Josippon is: