

Life and Reliability of Josephus: An Introduction

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Abstract

The article presents an introduction to the life and works of Josephus, the most important Jewish historian from the first century AD. Josephus played an active role in the First Jewish revolt against the Romans. After he was captured, he prophesied to Vespasian, his captor, that he would become the emperor. When he did, Josephus was enlisted as an associate, negotiator, and interpreter to Vespasian's son Titus. Josephus' work "The Jewish War" is of utmost importance for understanding the revolt because of Josephus' direct involvement in many events described in it. It gives valuable insights into the rebels' motives, the war's course, and the eventual Jewish defeat. As a Hellenized Jew, Josephus presented Jewish history from the earliest biblical times and composed some of the best apologies of Judaism. He also refuted anti-Jewish accusations spread throughout the Greco-Roman world in the "Antiquities of the Jews" and the treatise "Contra Apionem". His works may be considered the most valuable source of Hellenistic Jewish philosophical and theological thought of classical antiquity. Looking at it from a Christian perspective, Josephus is highly valued for his detailed descriptions of Judea before, during, and after the time of Jesus' life on earth and the establishment of the Church. His writings provide the most comprehensive extrabiblical description of the social, political, and religious context in which Christianity and the Church were born.

Keywords: Josephus, Judea, Jews, Judaism, Israel, Jerusalem, Second Temple, early Christianity, *Testimonium Flavianum*

1. Introduction: The First Century AD and Its Chronicler

The first century AD may be considered the most important century of classical antiquity, if not of the entire written human history. That is the time when Jesus lived, was crucified, and resurrected, when Christianity was born, and the Church was established. The Good News began to spread from Jerusalem and Judea to all parts of the world.¹ During the very same age, the form of mainstream Judaism that had developed for nearly a millennium changed profoundly. Since the time of king Solomon, Israel's religion, eventually called Judaism,² evolved around the Temple in Jerusalem, where the most important community rites were performed. The Temple was the central place of worship, sacrificial rites, Jewish religious hierarchy, political power, and national identity. During the festivals, it was a gathering place for Jewish pilgrims from Judea, Galilee, and the Diaspora. In the second half of the first century, Jews rebelled against the Roman government in Judea, provoked the war with the greatest military power of the time, and suffered a crushing defeat. In AD 70 the Romans captured Jerusalem and burned the Temple to the ground. These events prompted profound changes in Jewish theology, and transformed, to a degree, Jewish understanding of national redemption, righteousness, messianism, law, and the Canon. Sources in which these processes were recorded include the books of the New Testament for Christianity and rabbinical literature for Judaism. But it is the works of Josephus that provide the main insight into the context in which Christianity and other messianic movements emerged in Judea. He described the events that preceded the First Jewish revolt, the progress of its course, and its painful defeat. There is a strong link between Jesus' ministry and the First Jewish revolt in the form of messianic expectations widespread throughout Judea and the neighboring lands. If not for the work of Josephus, we would hardly know more than titles and subtitles to many of those processes and events. Thanks to Josephus, however, there is a rich content added under many "titles and subtitles." It would be rather difficult to obtain a deeper understanding of the beginnings of Christianity without Josephus' books. The early Church fathers recognized Josephus' importance, and they extensively translated, copied, studied, and commented on his works. Josephus' works were primarily preserved by Christians. Jews have long shunned and avoided Josephus because he was understood as a defector and a traitor. His importance in studying Jewish history has been eventually recognized even by Jews, however. A revival in Jewish studies of Josephus' occurred after the establishment of the State of Israel. Josephus' political conduct has been reevaluated, and Jews today view his behavior less as a high treason and more as one of political realism, pragmatism, common sense, and an

1 Acts 1:8.

2 About the origin of the term "Judaism" see Havel 2022, 17, 339, 440–441 (in Croatian).

effort to preserve Judaism from extinction, much like that of the prophet Jeremiah or Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. A prominent Jewish historian, Solomon Zeitlin, considers Josephus the most important Jewish historian of all time (Zeitlin 1978, 393). Steve Mason, an expert in early Christian literature and Josephus' works refers to him as "the peerless authority for first-century Judea" (Mason 2009, 7). To recap, historians have gained the most substantial knowledge about events of the most important century in the spiritually most important region of classical antiquity through the writings of a single author, Josephus. Who was Josephus, what did he write, and why?

2. The Life of Josephus

2.1. Josephus' Family Background and Youth

Josephus' Hebrew name was Yosef ben Matityahu (יוסף בן מתתיהו), that is, Joseph, the son of Mathias. He later adopted the name Flavius in honor of his patron, Flavius Vespasian, when he became the emperor. Josephus was born in Jerusalem in AD 37, during the first year of Caligula's reign. He belonged to a noble family with priestly roots. On his father's side, he descended from the "first of the twenty-four courses [of priests],"³ which was the order of Jehoiarib, a descendant of Aaron.⁴ On his mother's side, he descended from the Hasmoneans, a ruling dynasty that led the Maccabean revolt and liberated Judea from Seleucid Greek oppression. The Hasmoneans halted the violent Hellenization of Judean Jews, cleansed the desecrated Temple,⁵ and after more than four centuries of Judean subordination to foreign rulers – Chaldean, Persian, Ptolemaic, and Seleucid – renewed Jewish statehood and kingdom. Josephus' ancestors were traditional Jews with Hebrew names, such as Simon, Mathias, and Joseph. Josephus did not abide by that tradition and gave his three sons Hellenistic names Hyrcanus, Justus, and Agrippa.

According to his testimony, young Josephus was inclined to study, very intelligent, and had an excellent memory. He surpassed many of his peers in mastering the Greek language and eventually even wrote his famous works in Greek.⁶ When he was fourteen years old high priests and Jewish leaders consulted him for

3 *Vita* 1:2.

4 1 Chronicles 24:7.

5 1 Maccabees 4:52-59. The dedication of the altar, Hebrew *Hannukat Ha-Mizbeach* (הקנחת המזבחה), is a biblical (Numbers 7:10, 11, 84, 88; 2 Chronicles 7:9) and rabbinical literature (Midrash Rabba etc.) phrase. This event is celebrated on the Jewish holiday of Hannukah or "the Festival of Dedication," as it is called in the New Testament (John 10:22, NIV).

6 *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 20:262–263.

interpretation in legal matters. Mason, however, cautions that tales of “Wunderkinder” were commonplace in the legends of that era (Mason 2001, 14–15), and it is possible that Josephus adapted some of them to creatively boost his autobiography. We find similar creative arbitrary refinement of self-image in Josephus’ other works. At the age of sixteen Josephus decided to join one of the three Jewish sects, the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. He spent some time among all three sects considering which was the best fit for him. At that time, he heard of Banus, an ascetic who lived in the desert and decided to join him. Josephus spent three years with Banus, of whom nothing is known from other sources. Based on Josephus’ description, it seems likely that Banus was an Essene. Following his time with Banus, Josephus returned to Jerusalem at the age of nineteen, adopted the principles of the Pharisees, and climbed the stage of public and political life of Judea.⁷

2.2. Josephus’ Journey to Rome

When Felix, the Roman procurator of Judea, accused some Jewish priests of misconduct and sent them to Rome to plead their case before emperor Nero, a Jewish delegation went to Rome to assist them. Twenty-six-year-old Josephus, fluent in Greek and Latin, languages not widely spoken among Judean Jews (Jordi 2000, 420), joined the delegation. Upon arrival in Rome, Josephus approached empress Poppaea Sabina and convinced her of the priests’ innocence.⁸ The priests were set free, and Josephus obtained an outstanding reputation among Jewish leaders both in Rome and in Jerusalem. Later, when preparation for the revolt began in AD 66, Josephus’ role in the success of this diplomatic mission contributed to Sanhedrin’s decision to appoint him as the military commander of Galilee. The appointment indicated that Josephus was held in high esteem by the Jewish leaders, as Galilee was considered the most critical defense zone outside Jerusalem since the Romans were expected to launch their invasion of Jewish lands from the north.

2.3. Josephus’ Involvement in the Revolt, his Capture, and Adoption by the Flavians

Josephus proved to be an able organizer, a brave commander, and an apt manipulator. He oversaw the fortification of nineteen towns and villages in Galilee and Golan (Aviam 2007, 372), the harvest of crops, the storage of food, the collection of weaponry, and the training of Jewish fighters. All of this was happening while other ambitious and ruthless contenders to Josephus’ commanding position jeopardized not only the establishment of a defensive infrastructure and unity of Galilean Jews but also Josephus’ life. When Vespasian’s troops arrived in the spring

⁷ *Vita* 1:12.

⁸ *Vita* 1:13–16.

of 67 and moved against the rebels, Galilee was being torn from the inside by friction and discord. Advancing carefully but swiftly, Vespasian subdued Jewish strongholds one by one; most fortified places surrendered without any considerable resistance. The first to fall to the Romans was Gadara.⁹ The five cities that did put up a fight were Jotapata, Japha, Migdal, Gamla, and Mount Tabor. In July of 67, a decisive battle took place in Jotapata, where Josephus had retreated. After a prolonged siege, the city was captured. Josephus and forty of his comrades hid in a nearby cave. When the Romans discovered their hiding place, Josephus was willing to surrender, but his fellow rebels refused. They preferred death to slavery and decided to execute each other, one by one. The sequence of killing was determined by dice, and Josephus led the roll. Probably due to his gambling skills, he was one of the last two to die. He then persuaded his remaining comrade to surrender to the Romans.

Josephus was brought to Vespasian, who initially intended to send him to Nero. Upon request, Josephus spoke privately to Vespasian and prophesied that he would soon become the emperor and ruler “of the land and the sea, and all mankind,” which Vespasian understood as nothing more than Josephus’ “cunning trick.”¹⁰ A member of the lower aristocracy Vespasian was a highly unlikely candidate for the highest office in the Empire. Soon thereafter, however, Josephus’ prophecy came true. In June 68 Nero committed suicide. The bloody and inefficient rule of three succeeding emperors, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, prompted troops in the East to proclaim Vespasian as emperor. Vespasian freed Josephus from imprisonment, took him into his service, and eventually adopted him into the Flavian family. Vespasian’s son Titus assumed the command of the Roman troops in Judea, and Josephus followed him as he set off from Galilee across Samaria and the coastline to conquer Judea and Jerusalem. The two became friends and remained on friendly terms until Titus died in AD 81. During the siege of Jerusalem Josephus served as a Roman interpreter and negotiator. He attempted to persuade his former Jewish comrades to lay down their weapons, open the gates of Jerusalem, and surrender the holy city to the Romans. Besieged Jews hurled rocks, shot arrows, and spouted insults at him instead. Switching sides and riding with the Romans brought him contempt, aversion, and hatred from his unyielding compatriots and their posterity. After the rebellion was crushed and the war ended, Josephus was granted Roman citizenship and a pension by Vespasian. He moved to Rome where he remained for the rest of his days. He took on the name of his patron, Flavius. Josephus died between AD 100 and 110, probably without ever seeing Judea again (Rajak 2003, 11).

9 *Bellum Iudaicum* 3:132.

10 *Bellum Iudaicum* 3:398–403.

3. Josephus' Works

3.1. *The Jewish War*

The Jewish War was Josephus' first and essentially the most important work. He stated that he initially wrote it "in the language of our country," which is assumed to be Aramaic, and then translated it to Greek "for the sake of such as live under the government of the Romans."¹¹ Some scholars believe that Josephus originally wrote *The Jewish War* in Greek, using a preliminary draft he composed in Aramaic, rather than translating it from Aramaic altogether (Hata 1975, 89–108). A similar conclusion has been suggested by scholars who noticed Hebrew and Aramaic linguistic patterns in the Greek version, e.g., in the syntax. Josephus' use of Semitic forms of expression, however, can also be attributed to the multilingual culture in which he lived and produced his texts, in which Semitic linguistic forms influenced the Greek and vice versa.¹² In addition, it could have been caused by his use of Hebrew and Aramaic sources (Jordi 2000, 429–432). No Aramaic version of *The Jewish War* was ever discovered (Mason 2016b, 15–17); not even a single line or fragment of it. A few historians suggested that the Slavonic *Josephus' History of the Jewish War* is a translation of the Aramaic text (Leeming 2016, 390–391), but most scholars reject that theory.¹³ *The Jewish War* was the first Josephus' work translated into Latin in the 4th or 5th century as *Bellum Iudaicum* (Levenson and Martin 2016, 324). It has become customary to refer to Josephus' works in their Latin title.

Divided into seven books, *The Jewish War* primarily exhibits a first-hand description of the First Jewish revolt against the Romans, from its beginning in the early AD 66 until its final defeat which is usually associated with the fall of Masada in AD 73 (The Second Jewish revolt led by Bar Kokhba lasted AD 132 to 135). The diligent historian he was, Josephus in the introduction provided a

11 *Bellum Iudaicum* 1:3. Josephus' quotes are from the William Whiston's English translation published by Thomas Nelson Publishers.

12 There are similar influences among languages even today. For example, Jewish immigration into Israel is in Hebrew called *aliyah* (עלייה), and the corresponding verb to immigrate is *la'alot* (לעלות). Proper Hebrew expression for the line "to immigrate to Israel" is *la'alot le-Israel* (לעלות לישראל), *la'alot artza* (לעלות ארצה), or *la'alot le-Eretz Israel* (לעלות לארץ ישראל). An English speaker, however, who also knows some Hebrew, phrases "to immigrate to Israel" as "to make *aliyah*" since the Hebrew noun *aliyah* cannot be expressed in the form of a corresponding verb in English. The English syntagm "to make *aliyah*" eventually made its way into the colloquial Hebrew as *la'asot aliyah* (לעשות עלייה), verbatim "to make immigration," an awkward-sounding substitute for the more natural, elegant and accurate Hebrew verb *la'alot*, "to immigrate."

13 For more information about the Old Slavonic version of *The Jewish War*, see further in the text, under the heading 5.2. *An Indisputable Christian Alteration: The Slavonic Josephus*.

detailed account of the political background and the events that incited Judean Jews against Roman rule. The work starts with a description of the tyrannical rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid king, and the subsequent Maccabean revolt of the first part of the second century BC.¹⁴ Josephus' second major work *Antiquities of the Jews* had not yet been written, nor was it envisioned by Josephus. Therefore, when he wrote about the Maccabean revolt, which he later described in more detail in the *Antiquities*, he was building a case for the correlation of events from the restoration of Jewish statehood to its demise by the Romans. Josephus probably intended to show that the Romans were not the first against whom Jews raised a just rebellion.¹⁵ He emphasized the truthfulness of his account and vigorously insisted on his impartiality. In the preface to *The Jewish War*, he wrote: "I will not go to the other extreme, out of opposition to those men who extol the Romans, nor will I determine to raise the actions of my countrymen too high; but I will prosecute the actions of both parties with accuracy."¹⁶ Josephus underlined that he accurately and impartially described the events he was involved in as he sought to explain and justify the role he played in them. However, his efforts were in vain, as both contemporary and later Jews viewed his actions as treacherous. Mason explains that *The Jewish War* is "a work of political realism in its recognition that the powerful will and must rule" (Mason 2023, 208). The literary genre of this work is both narrative history and tragedy. It describes the severe difficulties and disasters that befell the Judean Jews and the people of Jerusalem during the Roman siege. Josephus' narration is saturated with compassion, a sense of hopelessness, and resignation to fate. The concept of fate or luck (τύχη) is referenced some ninety times throughout *The Jewish War* (Mason 2023, 189). Roman victories and ruthlessness, and Jewish calamities, are more or less directly attributed to it.¹⁷ Josephus thus shifts blame for the destruction of his people and their sanctuary away from the Romans and onto abstract forces, or fellow Jews who failed to recognize how senseless it was to rebel against the invincible Roman state. Vespasian likely convinced, and possibly ordered Josephus to write *The Jewish War*. According to conventional dating, *The Jewish War* was published between AD 75 and 79, when Josephus was around forty years old (Feldman 1999, 903). However, Feldman also suggests a possibility that it was published after AD 79.¹⁸

14 *Bellum Iudaicum* 1:31 ff.

15 *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 12:237 ff.

16 *Bellum Iudaicum*, Preface 9.

17 Josephus' frequent use of this term reveals his deviation from the Scriptural understanding of reality and acceptance of a Hellenist worldview. The concepts of fate or luck do not appear in the Hebrew Bible (Havel 2020b, in Croatian).

18 Feldman 1999, 903–904. A recent study on Josephus concludes that *The Jewish War* was "substantially completed" in AD 79, and "finished completely" in AD 81 (Edwards 2023, 4).

3.2. *Antiquities of the Jews*

Chronologically, *Antiquities of the Jews* was Josephus' second work, but it was second to none in terms of its extensiveness.¹⁹ It comprises twenty books and sixty thousand lines.²⁰ It was originally written in Greek²¹ and published in AD 93/94 during the reign of emperor Domitian when Josephus was fifty-six years old.²² The work is mainly known in its Latin translation, *Antiquitates Iudaicae*, which has at times been wrongly attributed to Saint Jerome (Kletter 2016, 370). According to Cassiodorus (c. 485–585), Jerome never translated any of Josephus' works.²³ In *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus described the history of the Jewish people from biblical times until the events immediately preceding the First Jewish revolt.²⁴ The work features profound Hellenistic influence on biblical stories. Josephus refrains from highlighting miracles mentioned in the Bible, and when he does mention them, he adds that everyone is entitled to their own opinion (Feldman 1999, 907). Edwards observes that Josephus seems to prioritize apologetics over ethics, as seen in his portrayal of biblical figures such as Joseph and Esther,²⁵ and concludes that “The reader is to learn not *how to behave* but that *the Jews are a people with a noble ancestry*” (Edwards 2023, 175, emphasis in the original). Josephus strove to demonstrate that Jewish thought was compatible with Hellenism, as a way of countering the growing hostilities toward Jews across the Roman Empire. Josephus' contemporary Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 BC–c. AD 50) shared a similar objective, though he was more of a philosopher than a chronicler. Near the end of his life, emperor Domitian (AD 81–96), who succeeded Titus, began to persecute Jews or those who practiced “Jewish rites.” Some sources claim that only his death

19 The title of Josephus' book could also be translated *Antiquities of Judea*. Nevertheless, *Antiquities of the Jews* is a better translation because the events described did not happen only in Judea. The Hebrew title קדמוניות היהודים (*kadmoniyot hayehudim*) also points to the people and not to the land (Schwartz 2007, 4). In Greek, the same word refers to both Jew and Judean (more about this in Havel 2022, 45–47, 361–363, 560, in Croatian).

20 *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 20:267.

21 *Contra Apionem* 1:1.

22 *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 20:267, Edwards 2023, 4.

23 Cassiodorus 2004, 149–150. As Levenson and Martin point, this fragment from Cassiodorus' work *Institutiones divinarum et saecularium litterarum* is the only source about the circumstances of translation of Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, *Against Apion*, and *The Jewish War* into Latin (Levenson and Martin 2016, 323). According to Feldman (1984, 851), however, Josephus was translated into Latin on Cassiodorus' initiative.

24 *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 20:267–268. *Antiquities of the Jews* ends with describing Florus' procuratorship of Judea and the twelfth year of Nero's rule.

25 Edwards here presents a comparison of two topics (apologetics and ethics), but the ethical messages in Josephus' works should not be underestimated. In Mason's list of topics in Josephus' writings, the dichotomy of “virtues and vices” is listed first (Mason 2003, 186).

prevented a Jewish revolt in the diaspora. If Josephus intended to use his works to persuade Domitian that Jewish faith, customs, and rites were reflections of an ancient and noble civilization, abounding in wisdom and creativity and not motivated by political treason, he apparently did not succeed.

3.3. *Against Apion*

In his treatise *Against Apion* (*Contra Apionem*), Josephus presented an even more elaborate defense of Judaism as an ancient, noble philosophy. This was “probably the last of his literary productions, and is arguably the most skilful” (Barclay 2016, 75). In *Contra Apionem* Josephus refuted some of the bizarre accusations made by Greeks and other Gentiles²⁶ against Jews. One of those accusations was that king Antiochus found a Greek prisoner in the Temple, who was being fattened for sacrificial slaughter.²⁷ Josephus also argued that Jewish faith and “philosophy” predated the Greek philosophy and was worthy of respect by non-Jews.

3.4. *Josephus’ Life*

Josephus’ work *Life of Josephus* (*Vita*) is “not really an autobiography in our sense of the word. Nor is it quite a *bios* (a life) in the ancient sense, that is, an account of a man’s moral qualities” (Rajak 2003, 12). *Vita* is mainly composed of Josephus’ apologies for his own decisions and actions. It is also the only work by Josephus that was not translated into Latin in the 5th or 6th century, but later (Mason 2001, xv). *Vita* was initially published towards the end of Josephus’ life, perhaps as an appendix to the *Antiquities of the Jews*. Josephus in *Vita* recounts some details of the Jewish revolt, especially those related to the early stages of the rebellion in Galilee.

Despite being Josephus’ “panegyric” to himself, this text is considered to have an inferior style compared to his other works, and it has been described as “confused, tendentious, inconsistent, with incorrect cross-references, with doublets, and with important segments of information presented in a casual and even a startling manner” (Feldman 1999, 914). Josephus was so focused on embellishing his image that he did not harmonize some of the data (Mason 2003, 169) and the chronology of events (Cohen 2002, 3–7) with what he had written previously in *The Jewish War*. By the time he published it, Josephus was already hated by his compatriots as a traitor and a defector. His autobiography, aimed at altering such perceptions, failed to score.

26 Josephus explained that the first false accusations against Jews were made by Egyptians after the Exodus (*Contra Apionem* 1:223).

27 *Contra Apionem* 2:89–98.

Works *Against Apion* and *Life of Josephus* were translated from the Greek original into Croatian by Luka Vukušić and published in 2011 by a Croatian Jewish community Bet Israel. *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War* have not been translated into Croatian language yet.

3.5. Books Previously Attributed to Josephus

Whiston's English translation of Josephus' contains, along with the four works mentioned above, an extract from a treatise called *Josephus' Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades*. Today is known with certainty that Josephus did not write that text. It was probably written by Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170–235), a Christian theologian, bishop, martyr, and saint. Among other books previously believed to have been written by Josephus is *The Fourth Book of Maccabees*, which was attributed to Josephus by Eusebius and Jerome (Charlesworth 1985, 533), and *Josippon*, a history of Jews until the end of the Second Temple period, written in the mid-10th century or somewhat later by an unknown author (Feldman 1984, 62–66).²⁸

3.6. Numbering of Josephus' Works

Four levels of text are used in numbering Josephus' major works. *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews* are divided into 1) books, 2) chapters, 3) sub-chapters, and 4) verses. The fourth level, or verse, is the smallest unit in the numbering even though, unlike biblical verses, it often contains more than one sentence.

Division into books was done by Josephus.²⁹ The division of books into chapters is of ancient origin, and it is found already in Cassiodorus. These chapters are long, and a single chapter might span across multiple pages, which is why Whiston's translation features additional sub-chapters. Newer editions add another, fourth level, that is verses, which is numbering known as Niese's numbering system, in honor of its inventor, Benedict Niese (1849–1910), a most prominent editor of Josephus' works in the German language of the time. Niese introduced this system in editions published at the end of the 19th century (Farmer 1984, 307). The publisher *Loeb Classical Library* adopted Niese's numbering system for their English translation of Josephus' works, and it has therefore also been known as Loeb's numbering system. Josephus' works are in this article cited only by Niese's, or Loeb's, numbering. It includes the book and verse number, but not the chapter and sub-chapter. That is the easiest and most precise way of citing Josephus. For example, the verse *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 12:130 would, according to Whiston's

28 According to Zeitlin, *Josippon* was written in the third or early fourth century (Zeitlin 1963, 297).

29 *Bellum Iudaicum*, Preface 30, *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 20:267.

numbering system, read *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 13:3.3, which is rather vague as it includes verses 129–144, spread over three pages in Whiston's 1998 edition published by Thomas Nelson Publishers.³⁰

4. Historiographical Value of Josephus

4.1. Josephus' Method and Bias

Josephus was among the first historians to invoke the principles on which modern scholarly study of history rests, that is objectivity and relevance of sources. We may argue that he often adhered to those principles, particularly in topics unrelated to disputed events of his life and career. For example, in writing *The Jewish War*, Josephus used Vespasian and Titus' notes, works of Nicolaus of Damascus, letters of Agrippa II, and testimonies of Jewish detainees, survivors, or defectors (Villalba i Varneda 1986, 267). Moreover, Josephus often described events he participated in or witnessed first-hand. He provided historical contexts, descriptions of landscapes, structures, relationships among key political players, court intrigues, and the motivations, characters, ambitions, fears, worldviews, and thoughts of many important characters – heroes and villains alike. He ventured into political, societal, military, historical, theological, and psychological analyses of people and events. Josephus' historical method often intertwines with shrewd calculation and blends with bias. However, his historical method cannot simply be dismissed because of it, as if bias is something generally alien to historians. Bias can be detected in the works of the most respected modern historians, so much so that “professional historians are [...] zealous in scrutinizing each other's work for bias” (Tosh 2000, 31–32). Biases do not necessarily indicate bad scholarship. It is almost self-evident that there is a certain level of bias in any given text of historiography. For example, if there is a great variety of sources on a certain topic, historians face a choice of which ones to include and which ones to leave out. Personal evaluation of sources by the historian is unavoidable in the process. A correlation between the choice of sources and the message that the historian highlights is reasonable and does not, on its own, diminish the value of the research. Few historians believe that historical research is an end in itself, but not all historians reveal the purpose of their research. Thus, we may argue that most Croatian historians have a sense of purpose in their scholarly work, especially when discussing modern topics and issues. They often write about events they participated in, such as the breakdown of Yugoslavia and the subsequent Croatian War of Independence, to which they have a personal commitment through family background, national

30 Whiston 1998, 379–381.

identity, political affiliation, ideological preferences, etc. Some Croatian historians research contemporary events both as scholars and as active participants. It is rather common in Croatia that the author's name and the title of his book alone spark expectations, and prompt discussions about the author's opinions, attitudes, intentions, and biases. Ultimately, our worldview is reflected in everything we create, whether it is our understanding of being, ourselves, the world, society, God, nature, destiny, epistemology, axiology, or history. Historians should be aware of their worldviews and biases and limit their influence on the methodology. However, these are modern thoughts about scholarly standards and as such should not be lightly applied in the evaluation of ancient texts. A historian's worldview is not only a self-evident part of his work, but it often determines his basic premises. Thus, historiographer John Tosh explains that Leopold von Ranke was "probably the last major historian to believe that the outcome of studies such as his own would be to reveal the hand of God in human history," and from the 18th century onwards history was often interpreted in the context of a secularized faith in perpetual progress that leads to a future of "triumph of reason and human happiness" (Tosh 2000, 6, 136). Josephus as a historian should be approached keeping all that in mind. His method and bias cannot be judged as if today we have somehow reached a perfection of historiographical objectivity; a high ground from which we can point out all of his failures and shortcomings. Any work, ancient or modern, could benefit from a more precise methodology, more diverse sources, a more unbiased approach, more objective content selection, fancier style, better coherence, or improved consistency. Josephus is no exception.

Josephus described an entire gallery of people in a picturesque, realistic, and colorful way, portraying their upright and wicked sides, virtues and vices, dishonorable and honorable acts, their flaws, and their merits. His final judgment of them is nevertheless often well-defined and easily discerned. Various events and people in his texts cannot be simply categorized as "good" or "bad," but reflect a reality that is "much more humanly complex" (Mason 2016a, 540–541). They fairly congruously reflect the complexity of biblical anthropology, and its ubiquitous evasion of the black-and-white depictions of persons, and even physical reality in general (cf. Havel 2019b, 529–541). Josephus often sought to discern the motives, emotions, and personalities of the protagonists, and set their conduct and deeds in the context of prevailing circumstances. An example of such an approach is Josephus' description of king Herod the Great. Similar to Herod's portrayal in the New Testament, Josephus describes him as an unscrupulous, deranged, sinister psychopath. That, however, did not prevent Josephus from praising Herod's ingenious building projects and his visionary, military, governing, and administrative skills.

Some parts of Josephus' text feature inconsistent and incomplete data, such as the conflicting ancestry of Mariamne II, the wife of Herod the Great and the daughter of the high priest (Smallwood 1962, 32–34). There are some discrepancies in the spelling and transliteration of names from Hebrew and Aramaic to Greek. Several important protagonists at some point disappear from the story, such as Joseph ben Gurion, one of the leaders of the revolt in Jerusalem. His fate remained unknown. Some citations from other sources were reproduced superficially and carelessly (Ilan and Price 1993, 189–208). Descriptions of Jewish rebel groups and chieftains, and Roman commanders and military leaders, such as Titus, are very biased and often reveal Josephus' tendency to present an apologetic picture of his own decisions and conduct. On the other side, some of his accounts of events from the First Jewish revolt were unexpectedly corroborated by archeological findings in the 20th century (Yadin 1998, 16). The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls confirmed the existence of the Essenes, a sect Josephus wrote about in *The Jewish War* (Schwartz 2016, 428). Archeological excavations verified Josephus' descriptions of the last defenders of Masada and the existence of Jerusalem's Third Wall (Ben-Arieh and Netzer 1979, 140), which had previously been known only through Josephus' writing. When Yadin led archeological excavations of Masada in the 1960s, he repeatedly confirmed Josephus' accuracy, even in some seemingly implausible accounts. For instance, archeologists witnessed and recorded a heavy downpour that saved Herod the Great's family and their entourage from thirst.³¹ Archeologists have also experienced a sudden, odd change in the wind that caused a portion of the wall to catch fire, opening a space for the Roman troops' breakthrough into Masada (Yadin 1998, 32–35).³² Some historians consider the siege of Masada to be the “most spectacular case where archaeology has enabled us to check Josephus' accuracy” (Feldman 1999, 905). Mordechai Aviam, a historian and an archaeologist, writes that archeological excavations have also confirmed Josephus' descriptions of the siege and fall of the Galilean towns of Yodefata (Jotapata) and Gamla. He led the excavation of Jotapata (Aviam 2007, 372–384).

Josephus diligently collected facts and fairly accurately described the events he considered important. His participation, or first-hand knowledge of many key events described in *The Jewish War*, are of supreme value. So are the unmediated testimonies he seems to have collected from Jewish survivors, as in his description of the siege and fall of Masada. Josephus' evaluation of Jewish leaders and groups, however, should be approached with caution, even distrust, as he portrayed them based on how close they were to his interpretation of the revolt. Uriel Rappaport

31 *Bellum Iudaicum* 1:286–287.

32 *Bellum Iudaicum* 7:310–400.

suggests four levels of Josephus' life and activities that prevent him from adhering to the truth:

[O]ne is personal (his role in the war and his personal image); the second is political (that is partisan, defending his and his "party's" position in the war); the third is national (caring for his people's interests, as he understood them) and the fourth is the service he rendered to his Roman benefactors, the Flavians (Rappaport 1994, 282).

Each of these four aspects is necessary for understanding Josephus as a historian. The historicity of many events he described, particularly in *The Jewish War*, could be valued differently by applying one or more of these levels as a prism through which they are observed. In addition, there is a significant difference between those parts where Josephus described contemporary events he participated in, witnessed, or had access to reliable and extensive sources on the one, and events from earlier periods of Jewish history when he had to rely on diverse and often inconsistent sources on the other hand. In the accounts of earlier times, Josephus sometimes used primary sources of supreme value, such as the works of Nicolaus of Damascus for the description of Herod the Great's rule, and sometimes he exhibited superficiality, carelessness, inconsistency, and messiness. An example of such "evidence of Josephus' weakness as historian," refers to the Ptolemaic and the beginning of Seleucid rule in Judea (Schalit 2007, 439).

4.2. *The Problem with Josephus' Description of Masada's Defenders*

Archeological discoveries at Masada seem to verify accuracy of Josephus' account of events, but disprove his portrayal of the Jewish rebels and Roman conquerors. Masada was held by Eleazar ben Jair, the commander of the Jewish militant group of sicarii, who escaped Jerusalem after the execution of his uncle Menachem, son of Judah the Galilean. Most Jews at Masada belonged to sicarii or the Zealots. This was the fourth Jewish sect often described by Josephus as bandits and thugs³³ responsible for the calamity that befell Jewish people. In describing their resistance at Masada, he stated that the name Zealots was derived from their zeal for good and that it suits them "only by way of irony."³⁴ That Zealots were only a

33 Josephus uses various names for the insurgent Jewish movements. At times he alternates between sicarii and Zealots, but he mostly calls them robbers (ληστίης) (Hengel 1989, 24). According to Josephus, Judah the Galilean was the founder of the fourth sect, the Zealots, whose beliefs were generally identical to those of the Pharisees. As their distinctive features Josephus adds that they highly valued freedom, considered God as their only ruler, and did not fear death (*Antiquitates Iudaicae* 18:4–10, 23–25). He did not, however, mention them when he described Judean Jewish sects in *The Jewish War*, where he only listed the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes (cf. *Bellum Iudaicum* 2:119–166).

34 *Bellum Iudaicum* 7:270.

band of robbers, as Josephus claimed, and not a movement of Jewish patriots who stood up against a foreign power that devastated their lands, as they claimed, is by no means a settled issue though. Josephus' works are the only historical source about the siege and fall of Masada, and Josephus' compatriots, as we discussed previously, perceived Josephus as a traitor. This alone casts doubt on the reliability of Josephus' description of Jewish groups and their leaders who were his political and ideological opponents. There is yet another possible motive of his, which could be regarded as Josephus' life mission. It was portrayal of Jews as a peaceful, enlightened nation whose loyalty to Rome was only brought into question unwarrantably, due to the revolutionary activities of a few militant, mean thugs. The instigator of rebellion in Josephus is not the Jewish nation, prompted by the desire for political freedom or messianic expectations. Rather, it is a group of criminals who not only attacked the Romans but also their fellow Jews, for robbery, rather than settling ideological disagreements. Josephus wrote under the patronage of Roman rulers who ravaged Judea, but his intended readership was also Jews, so he had to reconcile much that is unreconcilable, and explain much that is unexplainable. That is why it should not surprise us that he pertinaciously portrays Jewish rebels as thugs, the Romans as the force mandated by God to purge Judea of injustice, and himself as a prophetic voice and an advocate of reason and peace (cf. Rappaport 1994, 282).

Josephus' portrayal of Jewish rebels as thugs is probably the least convincing in the case of the siege and fall of Masada. Rich archeological discoveries found during the excavation of Masada in the 1960s confirmed Josephus' description of the events, but not his ideological profiling of the rebels. Archeologists have, among other things, found fragments of scrolls with biblical books, religious texts from the post-biblical period such as Ben Sira (Sirach), and a room that probably served as a synagogue. In that room, archaeologists discovered a fragment from the Book of Ezekiel buried in a *genizah*. A *genizah* (גיזיה) is a place where pious Jews store damaged, worn out, or unusable religious texts, which per the halakhic law may not be destroyed. An archeological expedition led by Yigael Yadin excavated fourteen scrolls with biblical, apocryphal, and the Essene sect's texts (Yadin 1998, 189). Were the Jewish defenders of Masada common thieves and thugs, it would have been rather unlikely that they would build a synagogue, hold religious rites, keep the Holy Scriptures, and store its damaged fragments in a *genizah*. True, this assumption could also be disputed. It would be anachronistic to assert that just because someone was a thug *ipso facto* means that he was also non-religious because in Judea of that age, there was no "secularism" in the form that appeared in much later history in Europe. However, there is in particular one scroll among the discoveries that sheds a new and, compared to Josephus, different light on the Masada Zealots. The scroll that surprised archeologists the most contained Hebrew verses from the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, which were identical to the

verses found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, in the fourth cave at Qumran. Since it is a text of the Qumran sect, probably the Essenes, and not a widely circulated biblical, apocryphal, or pseudepigraphic text, its discovery at Masada is rather surprising. Yadin points out that even before this discovery a few historians considered the possibility that the sicarii Zealots who defended Masada were the Essenes. Based on Josephus' reference to a certain John the Essene, one of the commanders of the central parts of Judea – Lod, Jaffa, and Emmaus, Yadin argues that at least some of the Masada fighters were Essenes,³⁵ as it is unlikely that only one Essene was among the rebels and a commander at that. It is more likely that numerous Essenes participated in the Jewish rebellion, and as the Romans captured rebel strongholds throughout Judea, surviving Essenes, along with members of other groups, ended up at Masada, taking their holy texts with them (Yadin 1998, 174). If true, this theory would contradict the established belief, largely based on the works of Philo of Alexandria, that the Essenes were a pacifist group that did not possess any weapons nor even tools that could be “perverted to wicked purposes,” and rejected participation in any war or conflict.³⁶ Yadin suggests an explanation that appears more suited to the Judean circumstances of the Second Temple period: Essenes refrained from interfering in wars caused by human striving for glory, as they deemed such wars theologically unjustifiable. However, when they perceived the Jewish rebellion against the Romans as being in accordance with, or prompted by divine will, they joined up.³⁷ Such an attitude would be consistent with the attitude of many Judean Jews, particularly those who were the most devout observers of Law when a call to armed conflict of Jews with a legitimate authority was proclaimed. Jews faced a similar dilemma in previous history when their people was exposed to violence by a foreign ruler whose right to the throne was beyond dispute. From the mainstream Jewish perspective, the core issue was not who was in government (i.e. Jew or Gentile), but how that government was obtained. Loyalty was due to any Gentile who could be presumed to rule by divine mandate, while an unlawful usurper of power, even if he was Jewish, could be denied obedience. Such dilemmas first appeared during the time of the Chaldean conquest of Judea and Jerusalem, and even more during the Jewish-Seleucid conflict. The dilemma of whether or not Antiochus Epiphanes' right to govern Jews was divinely sanctioned and theologically binding was resolved by his violent desecration of the Temple. The abomination he committed convinced most Judean Jews, including the reluctant Hasideans disinclined to political disobedience, to

35 *Bellum Iudaicum* 2:567.

36 Filon, *Quod Omn. Prob.* 78–79 (Philo 2008, 689); see also *Hyp.* 11:2 (Philo 2008, 746).

37 Cf. Yadin 1998, 173–174. Yadin argues that the discovery of the scroll is the evidence that the Essenes took part in the revolt, and he does not think it likely that only one of them, John, joined the rebels and rose to the rank of commander.

join the ranks of the Hasmonean rebels. Even if the Essenes did not initially participate in the rebellion against the Romans, and John the Essene was an exception, after the Romans burned the Temple and destroyed Jerusalem, their theological understanding of the rebellion probably changed. Consequently, it appears likely that the Jewish defenders of Masada were pious Jews who interpreted Jewish political independence as a reflection of God's favor, and not thugs and robbers. It is difficult to imagine the Essenes – accustomed to life of asceticism, prayer, and diligent copying and studying the sacred texts – sojourning Judea, randomly killing Jews, looting Jewish settlements, and burning Jewish homes. What is more, it appears unthinkable that pious Jews trapped at Masada entirely dependent on God, would allow the presence of any lawless thugs in their midst. God's help, as described in numerous biblical and other Jewish sources, would not have come to a camp permeated with lawlessness and sin, and God's help was the only help they could hope for as Romans closed in.

Josephus frequently accused the Zealots of desecrating the Temple, an offense which ultimately led to its destruction. Fifteen times in *The Jewish War* Josephus accused the Zealots of defiling and profaning the Temple (Regev 2011, 279–293). In many other instances, he accused them of immorality, greed, haughtiness, avarice, violence, ruthlessness, and lawlessness. And yet, in the very same book, Josephus states that the reason for the Jewish rebellion was an expectation that messianic prophecies would be fulfilled through their struggle:

But now, what did most elevate them in undertaking this war, was an ambiguous oracle that was also found in their sacred writings, how, “about that time, one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth.” The Jews took this prediction to belong to themselves in particular and many of the wise men were thereby deceived in their determination.³⁸

Josephus proceeds to clarify that the aforementioned prophecy pertains to Vespasian, who indeed became a ruler of the Roman Empire while being in Judea, “their country.” In the interpretation of the rebellion as a series of events prompted by Jewish messianic expectations, Josephus resembles pagan historians, such as Tacitus and Suetonius. Tacitus devoted a whole paragraph of *Histories* to the description of “omens” which the Judeans wrongly interpreted as divine signs and consequently rebelled against the Romans.³⁹ Tacitus, just like Suetonius, understood neither Judaism nor messianism, but he understood that the Jewish revolt was based on the expectations of some ancient prophecies being fulfilled, and thus discerned religion as its moving force. Tacitus routinely used derogatory terms for Jews, and yet he never mentioned thugs or thieves as the instigators and protagon-

38 *Bellum Iudaicum* 6:312–313, Hengel 1989, 238.

39 Tacitus 1931, 196–199 (*Histories* 5:13).

nists of the Jewish rebellion (Feldman 1999, 904–905). On the other hand, some Talmudic books describe rebels as ruthless enemies of both Romans and their Jewish brothers. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai rebuked his nephew, a leader of the Jerusalem rebels, because their conduct caused starvation in the city, to which he replied that his fellow rebels would have killed him had he objected.⁴⁰

The systematic siege of Masada indicates that the Romans spared no effort to prevent any of the defenders from leaving and, perhaps, continuing to incite the uprising elsewhere. As soon as they arrived at the slopes of Masada, the Romans constructed a siege wall around it.⁴¹ Parts of that wall are still preserved. The wall was about 2,7 miles long, with some parts erected over steep and difficult-to-access terrain (Gwyn 2011, 68). It is rather unlikely that the Romans would have undertaken such an ambitious construction enterprise had the Jews at Masada been but common thieves and thugs. The Roman attitude towards the Jews besieged at Masada differed from that of Titus toward Jews besieged in Jerusalem. While besieging Jerusalem, Titus repeatedly urged the Jews to abandon their rebellion, surrender, and evacuate the city. He promised to spare their lives and grant them freedom in exchange. Consequently, many Jews left or tried to leave Jerusalem. Among them was rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai who moved to Yavne (Jamnia) with a group of sages, and established a new center of Jewish learning.⁴² A possible reason for the different treatment of the defenders of Jerusalem (and previously the fortified rebel towns in Galilee) and Masada was a new Roman insight into the scope, motives, and depth of Jewish insurrection. It is possible that during the period between the fall of Jerusalem and the start of the siege of Masada, the Romans realized that the rebellion was not confined to a specific time or place, but was driven by eschatological messianic expectations. This led them to view the spread of the rebellion as a far more serious threat. Josephus does not mention any change in Roman perception of the nature of the rebellion, but a clear shift in the Roman stance toward Jews sheltered behind fortified walls provides a strong argument for further analyses, inquiries, theories, and assumptions along that line.

4.3. Jewish Attitude to Josephus

Solomon Zeitlin, one of the most eminent Jewish historians of the Second Temple period, wrote that “There is no doubt that Josephus was the greatest historian of

40 Gittin 56a:15. The title בִּרְיוֹנֵי (biryonei from *biryon*) denotes bandits and evildoers, but the etymology of the word is unknown (Zeitlin 1978, 136), cf. Berakhot 10:2–4.

41 *Bellum Iudaicum* 7:276.

42 In AD 70, rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai made a deal with the Romans to rescue dovish Jewish intellectuals from the besieged Jerusalem. He brought them to the coastal city of Yavne, where they established a new center for Jewish spiritual and intellectual life, saving thereby Judaism from destruction (for more on this, see: Havel 2022, 810–811, 867–869, in Croatian).

the Jewish people,” and he referred to Josephus as the “Judaean Thucydides” (Zeitlin 1978, 393). Such a Jewish attitude to Josephus mainly emerged in the second half of the 20th century and differs considerably from previous positions held for centuries. Jews traditionally despised Josephus and either ignored his works or approached them with utter distrust because he was “a traitor and a turncoat” and it was “natural to suspect that he was a liar as well” (Yadin 1969, 12). Such opinion about Josephus was based more on Josephus’ pro-Roman stance and conduct, than on perception of the accuracy of his historical method. Jewish historians’ cautious reconsideration of Josephus began in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The first Hebrew translations of Josephus appeared in the 1860s when Kalman Schulman (1819–1899) translated some of his works from German (Feiner 2019, 145). The first translations from the Greek original were published in the 1920s as a four-volume set and included *The Jewish War*, *Against Apion*, and *Life of Josephus*. The first volumes of *Antiquities of the Jews* were translated into Hebrew and published in the first half of the 1940s (Feldman 1984, 34–35). According to Schwartz (2016, 427), Josephus’ image among the Jews began to reshape due to the availability of his works in Hebrew, as they presented him to a wider Jewish audience as a defender of Jewish values, tradition, and identity. A period of Jewish ambivalence toward Josephus followed while new archeological excavations increasingly pointed to the accuracy of his descriptions. His perception as a traitor, however, was still intact. Yadin thus wrote that Josephus was a “brilliant historian and unfortunate Jew” (Yadin 1998, 15). A near complete “rehabilitation of Josephus’ image” happened in the 1970s and 1980s, as an outcome of the historical experiences of the Jewish people in the previous decades, including the Holocaust, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the subsequent wars with Arabs, especially the 1973 war, and the wallowing in the “Lebanese mud” of the 1980s, which transformed the idealized way Israelis looked at war, sacrifice, and victory (Schwartz 2016, 431). Since then, Josephus has been increasingly seen in the light of his contribution to the preservation of the Jewish spiritual and intellectual heritage, which would have been lost had he persisted in hostility to the Romans. In recent years Josephus’ legacy has been more and more associated with that of the prophet Jeremiah⁴³ and rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, and less with defection and high treason (Schwartz 2016, 432).

In the 20th century, an important part of the Zionist and Israeli collective identity began to shape around the symbol of Masada. Zionist poet Yitzhak Lamdan (1899–1954) published a poem in 1927 whose concluding words are: “Never again shall Masada fall!” (Schwartz, Zerubavel and Barnett, 1986, 155). The story of Masada became a “symbol of Jewish heroism and the modern State of Israel” and a “metaphor for the State of Israel: isolated, besieged, and surrounded by enemies

43 Concerning Jeremiah’s appeals to surrender Jerusalem to the Chaldeans, see: Havel 2022, 273–282 (in Croatian).

on all sides” (Magnez 2019, 197–198). Today, some units of the Israel Defense Forces swear their oath at Masada using the words of Lamdan’s poem, “Never again shall Masada fall,” expressing their commitment to safeguarding the State of Israel from destruction and the Jewish people from annihilation. Being the author of the story about the last stronghold of the ancient Jewish statehood,⁴⁴ Josephus thus finally attained a place among intellectual giants of the Jewish nation, not due to his self-apologetic autobiographical stunts, but due to the Jewish historical experience of 20th century.

4.4. *Christian Attitude to Josephus*

Christians were the first to recognize Josephus’ historiographical importance. According to *Eyclopaedia Judaica*, any historian “must be grateful to the Christian Church for preserving this treasure” (Schalit 2007, 441). The “treasure” includes some of the most important parts of Jewish history not mentioned anywhere else in Jewish texts, including the siege of Masada (Schwartz, Zerubavel and Barnett 1986, 148). Josephus’ works are mentioned or quoted in the patristic literature by authors such as Justin, Melito of Sardis, Theophilus of Antioch, Hippolytus of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, and John Chrysostom. St. Jerome called Josephus “the Greek Livy” (Huntsman 1996, 393), and Cassiodorus “almost a second Livy” (Cassiodorus 2004, 149). The most important reason for their interest in Josephus’ works is the fact that they provide an unparalleled extra-biblical insight into the circumstances of the Jewish lands which yielded the Christian faith. Thanks to Josephus, the teachings of Jesus can be placed into a broader historical context not provided by the authors of the New Testament. It includes social, religious, cultural, economic, political, and international circumstances within which the Church was born. Josephus provides valuable insight into the development of Jewish thought during the Hellenistic period in Judea. Along with the Pseudepigrapha,⁴⁵ his works provide the historian with an exceptional link between the Old Testament and the New Testament periods. Some passages of Josephus complement stories found in the Gospels, and contribute to the historical credibility of the New Testament. According to Christian belief and tradition, Josephus confirms the Gospels’ prophetic messages, most notably Jesus’ prophecies about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple,⁴⁶ interpreted by Christians as a divine punishment for Jewish unbelief in Jesus as the Mes-

44 The movement led by Bar Kokhba began sixty years after the fall of Masada and is commonly viewed as a rebellion, rather than part of the Judean statehood period. Post-exilic Judean state existed from the rise of the Hasmoneans until the collapse of the First Jewish revolt.

45 For an introduction to the Pseudepigrapha see Havel 2022, 34–35 (in Croatian). For English see Charlesworth 1983, and Charlesworth 1985.

46 Mark 13:1-2, Luke 21:5-24, etc.

siah. Christians therefore studied, copied, and preserved Josephus' writings, and kept them from fading into oblivion. Even Josephus' biography, which was translated into Latin at a relatively late time, is "the oldest autobiography that we possess from antiquity in its original form" (Feldman 1999, 913). Mason notes that "Christian authors took up Josephus's work with enthusiasm" because they attributed great value to them. Before Eusebius, however, they did not explain why they considered Josephus credible (Mason 2009, 13–14).

4.5. Josephus' Personality

In the context of their pursuit of evaluation of Josephus' historiographical value, scholars have been trying to decipher Josephus' character and personality. As we open this topic, we may find it somewhat puzzling since the issue of the personality of other historians of antiquity, such as Thucydides, Tacitus, or Cassius Dio, has not been discussed similarly, nor has the reliability of their chronicles been evaluated based on their character assessment. On the other hand, unlike Thucydides, Tacitus or Dio, Josephus was rather preoccupied with himself and deeply involved in the most important events he documented.

Josephus' works indicate a curious, creative, skilled, and daring man prone to adventure, hazard, and risk-taking. He was persistent, visionary, and strong-willed but not a fanatic. Quite on the contrary, he knew well when it was more convenient to back off, give up, or evade trouble. Josephus generally preferred pragmatism to idealism, but he shrewdly avoided appearing as a self-serving, ambitious opportunist. He skillfully and cunningly used his talents, eloquence, and charm, both among his Jewish comrades in arms and before Roman generals. He was clever enough to discern which side was winning and adjusted his moves and interests accordingly. However, it cannot be easily determined if and when he acted in a cold, calculated way. On the contrary, he strived to persuade the reader that he genuinely and wholeheartedly stood on the side of righteousness, probably after he had first convinced himself that it was so. Rappaport believes that Josephus, dissatisfied with his accomplishments both before Romans and Jews, presents to himself and to his readers his "Ideal Ego" (Rappaport 2007, 71), which does not correspond to reality. Harsh reality and the instinct to survive compelled him to make difficult decisions, that he needed to creatively reconcile with the lofty Jewish ideals of justice and duty. And creative he was. Josephus' tacit or plain apologies for Roman atrocities, alongside his lifelong effort to justify the Jewish people, indicate a tormented, torn soul. He swiftly and superficially addressed unpleasant issues or avoided them altogether. Thus he wrote little about his wives (Goodman 1994, 337), especially about the one who remained in the besieged Jerusalem, whom he might have abandoned to marry another. On the other hand, his vanity, calculatedness, opportunism, and somewhat split identity enabled him

not only to survive the tumultuous events but also to understand them, turn them to his advantage, record them, and make them into his lasting legacy. To what extent perceptiveness and literary talent can coexist with an unsettled identity, selfish opportunism, and even deep dark side of the author's personality, Croats might surmise from the example of Ivo Andrić.⁴⁷ Josephus was talented, eloquent, intelligent, analytical, and adaptable enough to direct generations of readers – except for Jews – to focus on his works rather than on his apparent character flaws. In contemporary historical research, however, the issue of his personality, character, motives, and identity has become inevitable.

5. Testimonium Flavianum

5.1. Does Josephus Mention Jesus as Messiah?

In several places, Josephus mentions individuals who occupy a central place in the books of the New Testament, prompting scholars to investigate the authenticity of these fragments. One such instance is in *Antiquities of the Jews*, where Josephus described the murder of John the Baptist in the Transjordan fortress of Machaerus. According to Josephus John was a godly and righteous man, and Jews believed that king Herod Antipas suffered the military defeat by Nabateans as God's punishment for killing him.⁴⁸ There are no substantial reasons to doubt the authenticity of that paragraph, and there are no contradictions between Josephus' account of John with those presented by Matthew or Mark. Generally, we may assert that Josephus' account complements the New Testament (cf. Feldman 1984, 673–679). Elsewhere in *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus mentions James, “brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.”⁴⁹ That line has also been widely accepted as authentic by most contemporary scholars (Feldman 1984, 704; Whealey 2016, 353). The section that is often considered controversial is the so-called *Testimonium Flavianum* or *The Testimony of Flavius Josephus*. It is also found in the *Antiquities of the Jews*, in Josephus' account of Pilate's rule over Judea. It speaks of Jesus of Nazareth and reads as follows:

About this time, there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who performed surprising deeds and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of

47 Cf. Nemeč 2016, (in Croatian). Ivo Andrić (1892–1975), a recipient of Nobel Prize for Literature in 1961, was born to a Croatian Catholic family in central Bosnia and Herzegovina.

48 *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 18:116–119.

49 *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 20:200.

the Greeks. He was the Christ. And when, upon the accusation of the principal men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross, those who had first come to love him did not cease. He appeared to them spending a third day restored to life, for the prophets of God had foretold these things and a thousand other marvels about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.⁵⁰

The authenticity of *Testimonium Flavianum*, or parts of it, has been called into question by many historians.⁵¹ In his work *Contra Celsum*, written in the mid-3rd century, Origen (c. 185–c. 254) claimed that Josephus does not acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. This perhaps suggests that the *Testimonium Flavianum* may not have been included in the version of Josephus' text Origen had at his disposal. However, shortly thereafter Eusebius (c. 265–340) knew about Josephus' paragraph about Jesus, and this is how he retold it in his *Ecclesiastical History*:

About the same time, there was a certain Jesus, a wise man, if indeed it is proper to call him a man. For he was a performer of extraordinary deeds; a teacher of men, that received his doctrine with delight; and he attached to himself many of the Jews, many also of the Greeks. This was Christ. Pilate having inflicted the punishment of the cross upon him, on the accusation of our principal men, those who had been attached to him before did not, however, afterwards cease to love him: for he appeared to them alive again on the third day, according to the holy prophets, who had declared these and innumerable other wonderful things respecting him. The race of the Christians, who derive their name from him, likewise still continues (Eusebius 2004, 27–28).

According to L. H. Feldman, between Eusebius and Jerome eleven Christian authors wrote about Josephus, but none of them mentioned the *Testimonium Flavianum* (Feldman 1999, 911–912). This suggests that the paragraph may have been inserted or modified. Mason points out that the oldest copies of Josephus' works date from the 9th and 10th centuries (Mason 1993, 167), which increases the possibility that the original Josephus' text was somewhat altered. On the other hand, the fragment containing the testimony is present in all existing versions of *Antiquities of the Jews* (Feldman 1999, 911). In Jerome's text called *On Illustrious Men*, written around 392 and preserved in a version from the 6th or 7th century, the part of *Testimonium Flavianum* in which Jesus was mentioned reads "he was believed to be the Christ" (Whealey 2016, 346–347).

It is impossible to prove or disprove the assumption that *Testimonium Flavianum* was a later Christian interpolation or revision. In the late 19th century, when the credibility of all ancient texts relevant to Christianity was being critically

50 *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 18:63–64. Cf. Havel 2022, 682; Božiković 1981, 472 (in Croatian) etc.

51 For a comment of this paragraph see Klausner 1926, 55–58.

examined, many if not most scholars speculated that *Testimonium Flavianum* was a Christian forgery altogether (Whealey 2016, 354). To the extent to which this was an ideological attempt to rebut the origins of Christianity, a historiographical debate is futile. The opinion that *Testimonium Flavianum* is a complete forgery was never universally accepted, and today it is no longer even the majority view. A small number of scholars believe that *Testimonium Flavianum* is entirely authentic.⁵² The issue of possible ideological bias can be raised even in those cases. It is a defensible assumption that *Testimonium Flavianum* was edited to a certain extent but not completely interpolated (Eisler 1930, 21–30; Mason 1993, 163–175; Feldman 1999, 911–912; Whealey 2016, 345–355, etc.), and that Josephus wrote that Jesus was “believed to be the Christ.” This can be deduced based on other sources, such as the aforementioned Jerome’s text and its recently discovered fragments in Syriac and Arabic (Whealey 2008, 587–588). This theory does not diminish the historiographical value of Josephus’ *Testimonium Flavianum*, because Josephus was not a Christian. A sentence thus formulated would also explain Origen’s observation that Josephus does not recognize Jesus as the Messiah (Whealey 2016, 352).

5.2. An Indisputable Christian Alteration: *The Slavonic Josephus*

Examination of this delicate issue should include a comparison of Josephus’ writings with the undoubtedly forged texts claiming to be of Josephus’ authorship. What Josephus’ text reconstructed by Christians looks like may well be understood by reading *The Slavonic Josephus*. It is a translation of *The Jewish War* into Old Slavonic language, dating back to the 11th century, with the oldest known manuscript written in 1463 (Leeming 2016, 391). Although some historians argued that the Slavonic translation may have come from a lost Aramaic version of *The Jewish War* (which, if true, would be spectacular for the study of Josephus), today it is generally accepted that it was “apparently made in the eleventh century” and used by Christians, perhaps “in the ideological struggle against the Khazars” (Feldman 1999, 918; Leeming and Leeming 2003, 75–76).⁵³ Some parts of Josephus’ text have been removed, and some parts of undeniably Christian origin inserted. *The Slavonic Josephus* includes sections with anti-Jewish messages, details about the arrival of the wise men at king Herod’s court, passages about John the Baptist, stories of Jesus “the miracle worker,” etc.⁵⁴ In Josephus’ works that are today considered authentic, there are no identifiable “Christian ideological” passages,

52 For a comprehensive analyses of various perspectives and interpretations until 1980 see Feldman 1984, 679–703.

53 See also Zeitlin 1929, 1–50; Zeitlin 1948, 171–180; Meier 1990, 78; Leeming 2016, 390–401, etc.

54 For texts of Old Slavonic and Greek versions of *The Jewish War* translated into English see Leeming and Leeming 2003, 107–639.

except the claim that Jesus was the Christ (as opposed to the claim that Jesus was believed to be the Christ). Thus, speculations about a possible Christian revision of Josephus' writings beyond that sentence do not seem justifiable.

6. Final Observations

6.1. *Value of Josephus' Works in Comparison to Sources About the Second Jewish Revolt*

The works of Josephus represent the most valuable historiographical sources for the study of the events and processes of first-century Judea. Largely because of Josephus, this turbulent and for Christians the most important period of Judean history is also the most documented. How poor and deficient our historical knowledge of first-century Judea without Josephus would be, is perhaps best evident in comparison to the last major event of ancient Jewish Judean history, the Bar Kokhba revolt. After the Bar Kokhba revolt AD 132–135 Jewish political thought profoundly and seemingly permanently changed: active messianism was rejected, political activism with the purpose of the reestablishment of an independent Judea was considered theologically illegitimate, and messianic expectations were reduced to passive awaiting for a divine eschatological intervention (Havel 2020a, 224); a position dominant in Jewish political theology until recently. Despite such immense historical, eschatological, theological, political, ideological, and intellectual importance of the Bar Kokhba revolt, very little was known about it until archeological discoveries in the 20th century, solely because there was no chronicler of Josephus' caliber to record it. Even after modern archaeological discoveries shed much new light on it, understanding of the Bar Kokhba revolt remains an incomplete mosaic, with a new piece added here and there. Even the name of the revolt's leader was not known until the latter half of the 20th century, and the debate as to whether the rebels captured Jerusalem from the Romans is still ongoing (Havel 2019a, 481–482).

6.2. *Extensiveness of Josephus' Work and Modern Interdisciplinary Studies*

The extent of Josephus' knowledge, his access to first-class sources, and his preserved literary opus are unparalleled in the ancient history of Judea. The history he recorded is so extensive and eventful, rich with intricate details, contexts, terminology, names, geography, tactics, intrigues, emotions, psychological analyses, literary creativity, facts, figures, and sources that it is hard not to be impressed by his work, and even harder to expect a perfect one. As Josephus was working on his Greek manuscripts, he was likely assisted by editors and proofreaders. It is highly unlikely though that he had anyone even remotely as knowledgeable in Jewish

and Judean history, languages, and cultures as him, who would have been able to contribute to the content. In addition to his vast knowledge, Josephus was gifted with keen observation and writing skills, vivid imagination, and visionary ingenuity. He conveniently utilized his gifts and skills to improve someone's reputation (mostly his own) or to discredit someone (mainly his opponents). However, his primary goal was to bridge the gap between the Greco-Roman world and the Jewish theological and philosophical thought, as he understood it. He invested much effort in explaining Jewish customs that seemed bizarre in the Hellenized world and that provoked even more bizarre anti-Jewish allegations. Josephus is credited with coining the term "theocracy," which was for the first time used to describe the political system of Judea (Baron 1952, 152).⁵⁵ It is undeniable that the work of Josephus is immensely valuable for the study of the periods he wrote about, as he was a direct witness or had access to historical materials and sources that are mostly lost today. Additionally, Josephus personally knew some of the most important figures involved in the political events of the era, giving him unique insights that most historians, then and now, could only dream of. His social network included emperors, kings, dignitaries, Jewish leaders of the revolt, Roman officials, generals, policymakers, and administrators both in Judea and in Rome, spanning from Nero's reign to the end of the period he chronicled. He was friends with the Judean king Agrippa II and the Roman emperors Vespasian and Titus. Few people were as acquainted with the Jewish past and worldview, Hellenistic culture, Greco-Roman history, thought, and philosophy in general and were so well-versed in Hebrew, Aramaic, Latin, and Greek, as Josephus was. He was attracted to all those cultures, harbored no dislike toward any of them, and considered them all, in a way, his own. This made him uniquely equipped and competent for comparative analyses. Additionally, verifiable data found in Josephus largely corresponds to facts found in the works of other historians, such as Polybius, Livy, Tacitus, Suetonius, or Dio, and in the books of the New Testament. Consequently, we may assert that the extraordinary value of Josephus' works is not denigrated by the mistakes, shortcomings, inconsistencies, occasional negligence, frequent bias, or flaws of his character. All those should neither be ignored nor overemphasized but researched in the light of new perceptions and discoveries. Considering the contemporary development of interdisciplinarity, where academic fields of historiography, archaeology, theology, political science, psychology, linguistics, and other branches of humanities and social sciences intertwine like never before, a final verdict on Josephus and his work is far from settled.

55 *Contra Apionem* 2:165. Josephus compares the government of Jews whose legislator ascribed the authority and the power to God, with the governments of other nations ruled by monarchs, oligarchs, or the people.

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Boris Havel

Život Josipa Flavija i pitanje pouzdanosti njegovih djela

Sažetak

U članku su prikazani život i djela Josipa Flavija, najvažnijega židovskog povjesničara iz prvoga stoljeća poslije Krista. Flavije je bio sudionik Prvoga židovskog ustanka protiv Rimljana, a nakon zarobljavanja i proroštva Vespazijanu da će postati carem, suradnik, pregovarač i prevoditelj njegovu sinu Titu. Zbog izravnog sudioništva u mnogim zbivanjima koja opisuje u *Židovskom ratu* to je njegovo djelo od neprocjenjive važnosti za uvid u motive, tijek i slom ustanka. Kao helenizirani Židov u *Židovskim je starinama* i u raspravnici *Protiv Apiona* predstavio židovsku povijest od najranijega biblijskog razdoblja i apologetiku židovstva te je opovrgavao protužidovske optužbe raširene u grčko-rimskom svijetu. Njegova djela stoga predstavljaju i dragocjen dio helenističke židovske filozofske i teološke misli staroga vijeka. Iz kršćanskog je očista Flavijeva najveća vrijednost u opisima Judeje u vrijeme prije, tijekom i nakon Isusova života na zemlji i nastanka prve Crkve. Iz njegovih se djela pruža najširi, najopsežniji i najdublji izvanbiblijski uvid u društvene, političke i vjerske prilike u kojima je nastalo kršćanstvo.