

# Josephus

**Josephus, Flavius** Jewish historian and general in the war of the Jews against the Romans in a.d. 66–70. Josephus was born the son of a distinguished priestly family sometime between Sept. 13, a.d. 37, and March 16, 38, and died probably ca a.d. 100 in Rome. His writings give some information about his life and family relationships. He was married four times and had five sons. His parents provided him an excellent rabbinic education, and at the early age of fourteen, so he boasted, he was so learned that the high priests and the leading men of the city of Jerusalem consulted him about matters of the law. Presumably he had also learned some Greek as a youth. When he was sixteen he undertook further training with the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and finally with a hermit. At nineteen he joined the Pharisees and remained for the rest of his life a faithful pharisaic Jew, perhaps of Shammaite tendency. He did not, however, take part in the new development of rabbinic Judaism after a.d. 70. In 64, when he was twenty-nine years old, he traveled to Rome to procure the release of several pious priests, his friends, who, as he said, had been arrested and sent there on insufficient grounds by the governor Felix. He was successful, thanks to a chance meeting with Nero's wife Poppaea.

When he returned to his homeland, probably impressed by the splendor and might of Rome, he tried first to extinguish the rising fires of insurrection against Rome but finally joined the rebels and became general of the Jewish forces in Galilee. His activities as regional commander, some of which were dubious, culminated in the heroic defense of the fortress Jotapata against Vespasian in 67. Taken prisoner and led before the Roman commander-in-chief, Josephus, who as a priest felt himself especially qualified to know and proclaim God's will, prophesied that Vespasian would become caesar. His prophecy was probably influenced by his insight that Rome was now called to rule the world and that the Jewish people probably could survive, independent and secure, in cooperation with Rome. Vespasian, evidently impressed

with this man, spared his life and, when he actually was proclaimed caesar in 69, set Josephus free. Through this act of manumission Josephus became Josephus Flavius, i.e., Vespasian's family name (*gens Flavia*) was added to his own name. Vespasian's son Titus, whom Vespasian commissioned to end the war against the Jews, took Josephus to Judea, where Josephus was able to witness at firsthand the siege and capture of Jerusalem in the summer of 70. He returned with Titus to Rome, where he lived the life of an author as a favorite of Caesar's court. There he wrote, as a kind of court historian, his *Jewish War* (*De bello judaico* = BJ), a complete description of the war of 66–70, preceded by a thorough description of the events leading up to that war. After the death of Vespasian Josephus retained the favor of his successors Titus and Domitian (d a.d. 96), but the end of his life is obscure.

Four of his works are extant: the *Jewish War* in seven books (a.d. 75–79); *Jewish Antiquities* (*Ant.*) in twenty books (completed 93/94); his autobiography (*Vita*) in one book, a kind of appendix to the *Antiquities* that contains mainly a comprehensive accounting of his activity in Galilee and relatively little about the remaining events of his life; and *Against Apion* (*Contra Apionem* = CAp), written certainly after 93/94 but probably before 96. This last is a thorough and convincing defense against the anti-Jewish polemic of non-Jewish authors and is at the same time a description of central Jewish religious convictions. It is uncertain whether Josephus wrote any other works. These alone make him a very important Jewish historian, perhaps the most important. His *Antiquities*, partly a free paraphrase and adaptation of the biblical books, comprise a history of the Jewish people from the creation of the world until his own time, as well as a kind of introduction to his earlier work. Not until H. Graetz, who in the 19th cent wrote his *History of the Jews*, did anyone venture an undertaking of similarly great scope. Without the *Antiquities* and *Jewish War* little would be known about the historical events and the religious currents in

Palestine in the two centuries before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70. The value of Josephus lies in his usefulness as a source for the history of Christianity as well as of Judaism; for his accounts are especially extensive precisely for those decades in which Christianity originated. Like Philo and the LXX, his writings were valued and used so much by the early Church that they were soon transmitted only by Christians and were almost forgotten in Judaism.

The way in which Josephus composed his writings is still subject to some scholarly debate. In writing *Jewish War* — which was originally in Aramaic — he did use helpers proficient in languages, because at the beginning of his writing career his command of Greek was insufficient to enable him to write with acceptable literary skill. His three other works, however, were probably written without any stylistic helpers. Any suggestion that Josephus continually rewrote his works and issued different editions is unfounded.

It is true that, very early in the transmission of Josephus's writings, Christians altered some sections and misrepresented Josephus as demonstrating some Christian beliefs. Thus the famous *testimonium Flavianum*, supposed to be the witness of the Jew Flavius Josephus to Jesus Christ, is certainly not genuine in its traditional form; at the most it contains a genuine nucleus. This *testimonium* was considered especially convincing because it had come from the enemy camp, so it was an important factor in the high honor given to Josephus by the early Church. (See Jesus Christ I.B.)

The value of Josephus for the reader and student

of the OT and NT is so high that already in the Middle Ages he was often seen almost as a church father, and in more recent times his work has sometimes been regarded — half jestingly — as a “Fifth Gospel” or “Small Bible.” The first half of the *Antiquities* is an especially invaluable witness to Jewish biblical exegesis, and Jewish traditions of all kinds, in the time of the origin of the NT. His works increase our knowledge of many historical and geographical details found in the Gospels. For example, Josephus's descriptions of the Jewish revolutionary parties and the Essenes are indispensable sources for the study of the Zealots and the Qumrân texts. His accounts of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 seemed to some early Christians to show the fulfillment of the NT threats of punishment for this city, which, for example, led to an old Syriac translation of his account of the destruction being taken into the Syriac canon as a “Fifth Maccabees.” Parts of Josephus's works were even bound into some editions of the printed Bibles. As late as the 19th cent, especially in the English-speaking world, the reading of Josephus in many private homes was second only to the reading of the Bible.

**Bibliography.**—H. St.-J. Thackeray, et al, eds, texts and translations in LCL (9 vols, 1926–1965); H. Schreckenberg, *Bibliographie zu Flavius Josephus* (1968), *Supplementband* (1979); D. M. Rhoads, *Israel in Revolution 674 C.E.: A Political History Based on the Writings of Josephus* (1976); S. J. D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian* (1979); Engtr by W. Whiston (1867, often reprinted).

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