

Convenient Fiction or Causal Factor?

The Questioning of Jewish Antiquity

according to *Against Apion* 1.2

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Introduction

This volume highlights and explores the crossroads between literary analysis and historical reconstruction. Most contributions examine the relationship between ‘what Josephus wrote’ in Rome and ‘what actually happened’—primarily in the Land of Israel. Presently, however, I am concerned with a different kind of historical reconstruction: What is the relationship between what Josephus wrote and his actual situation in Rome, his actual audience, the actual response to his writings, etc.?¹

The first few lines of *Against Apion* lead us to such a junction and raise such questions. In his opening address to Epaphroditus, Josephus claims that the evidence for Jewish origins and history should be sufficiently demonstrated by his *Antiquities* (*Apion* 1.1). He continues:

Since, however, I observe that a considerable number of persons, influenced by the malicious calumnies of certain individuals, discredit the statements in my history concerning our antiquity, and adduce as proof of the comparative modernity of our race the fact that it has not been thought worthy of mention by the best known Greek historians, I consider it my duty to devote a brief treatise to all these points ... (*Apion* 1.2–3)²

Apparently, Josephus wishes to respond to criticism along two lines.³ He is first of all concerned with the alleged questioning of Jewish antiquity through references to Greek historiography. Secondly, he claims that his critics are inspired by the “malicious calumnies” of Apion, Apollonius Molon and others. Presently, we will focus on the former issue, which is Josephus’ chief concern in roughly the first quarter of *Against Apion* (1.1–218), whereas we leave out the previous literary treatments of the Jews and Josephus’ responses in the later parts of treatise.⁴

Chaim Milikowsky takes Josephus’ reference to contemporaneous critics mostly at face value:

¹ This article represents a development of a chapter in my dissertation. See Haaland 2006a, 235–242. For a recent commendation of historical inquiry along such lines, see Mason 2003, 187–188.

² The writings of Josephus are quoted from the edition of the Loeb Classical Library.

³ For a similar analysis of the preface as a reference to a two-fold challenge, see Barclay 2005b, 31–33.

⁴ Several scholars emphasize that the accounts of the Jews by Manetho, Chaeremon, Lysimachus and Apion as we have them in *Against Apion* are the results of Josephus’ deliberate, rhetorical adaptation. The anti-Jewish bias of these authors may therefore originally have been far less conspicuous. See e.g. Barclay 1998, 203, 206–221; Gruen 2005; Jones 2005. Moreover, Feldman points out that several of those statements that provoke Josephus’ reaction may have appeared quite harmless or even commending to a different audience. See e.g. Feldman 1996. However, as far as I can see, it remains that Josephus was not the sole inventor of ancient anti-Jewish polemics.

Quite clearly, he is responding to specific stimuli: someone doubted the antiquity of the Jews, and instead of simply taking this doubt to be a sign of the doubter's ignorance, Josephus feels the need to prove the antiquity of the Jews by recourse to the Greek-writing authors of the Jews' neighboring countries.⁵

Other scholars are more skeptical. Martin Goodman suspects that these critics were “invented by Josephus as straw men to knock down.”⁶ Erich Gruen, similarly, expresses his “strong suspicion that he (Josephus) has concocted a confrontation on this issue.”⁷ John Barclay is more specific. He accepts the veracity of Josephus' reference to criticism against *Antiquities* while suggesting that Josephus has misrepresented the *content* of the criticism. It was probably more a matter of cultural insignificance (cf. *Apion* 1.2: “not been thought worthy of mention”) than comparative modernity.⁸ Most confident on this issue is Arthur Droge:

Josephus' reference to a “considerable number” of Greeks who doubted the antiquity of the Jews was a necessary and convenient fiction: necessary because it provided a pretext for his chronological argument in defense of Moses' unparalleled antiquity; and convenient because the relative lateness of Greek culture was an easy target.⁹

The suspicion arises for the following reasons, in particular: First, Jewish antiquity appears to have been widely recognized in Josephus' days. Second, and more specifically, it is claimed that no such charge against the Jews is preserved anywhere else in the literature from antiquity.¹⁰ Third, and even more specifically, Josephus' failure to name his critics, let alone provide literary evidence for the questioning of Jewish antiquity, gives reason for suspicion.¹¹ Fourth, the introduction of such criticism serves Josephus' rhetorical strategies, as Droge in particular emphasizes.¹² Of these four points, the first and the third can be treated quite briefly, whereas the second and the fourth demand a more thorough discussion.

Jewish Antiquity and the Recent Culture of the Greeks

First of all, the questioning of Jewish antiquity based on Greek evidence is indeed quite conspicuous. Not only was there a widespread consensus regarding “the relative lateness of Greek culture” ever since Herodotus and Plato,¹³ the antiquity of the Jews was also well established from Hecataeus of Abdera and onwards. The Jewish way of life was certainly

⁵ Milikowsky 2002, 173.

⁶ Goodman 2004, 21; cf. Goodman 1999, 52. Karin Keeble, a student of Goodman's, makes the same point, but is far less reserved. See Keeble 1991, 15–16, 25–26, 29, 39.

⁷ In the end, however, Gruen apparently assumes that Josephus indeed faced such criticism. See Gruen 2005, 40, 48.

⁸ Barclay 2005b, 32.

⁹ Droge 1996, 140, cf. 117.

¹⁰ See e.g. Pilhofer 1990, 216; Keeble, 15; Goodman 2004, 21; Barclay 2005b, 32; Gruen 2005, 40.

¹¹ See e.g. Gruen 2005, 40–41.

¹² Keeble 1991, 25–26, 28, adds some additional arguments that are less convincing and partly circular: The questioning of Jewish antiquity seems fictitious because it provides a convenient opportunity for Josephus to highlight his skills as historian, because he is concerned about providing evidence for the truth of the accusation, and because he disguises its artificial nature by treating it alongside of genuine criticism.

¹³ See e.g. Herodotus, *Hist. 2 passim*. For Greek dependence upon Egyptian legislation, see e.g. Herodotus, *Hist. 2.177*. For the antiquity of Egyptian records and genealogies, see e.g. Herodotus, *Hist. 2.100*, 142–143; Cicero, *Resp.* 3.14. For Greek philosophers learning from Egyptian priests, see e.g. Plato, *Tim.* 22; Isocrates, *Bus.* 22–23, 28; Diodorus 1.96; Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 10. For scholarly discussions, see e.g. Lewy 1938, 215–228, 234; Schäublin 1982, 318–321; Smelik and Hermerlijk 1984, 1873–1876; Pilhofer 1990, 17–75; Droge 1996, 119–121; Feldman 1998, 229–230; Berthelot 2000; Gruen 2005, 40–41; Barclay 2005b, 37–39.

subject to skepticism and ridicule, but it mostly appears as if Jewish antiquity was presupposed.

Evidence for the wide recognition of Jewish antiquity is even found within *Against Apion*. At the beginning of the final part of the treatise (*Apion* 2.145–296), Josephus refers to “our legislator, who lived in the remotest past” and adds the following comment: “that, I presume, is admitted even by our most unscrupulous detractors” (*Apion* 2.156). And toward the end, he returns to Moses’ chronological superiority compared with “those other legislators” (*Apion* 2.279) as an apparently uncontroversial matter. Hence Greek critics questioning the antiquity of the Jews indeed appear as “an easy target.”

In this connection, I would add that in *Against Apion* Josephus deliberately casts the attacks on Jewish character as “Egyptian” and the questioning of Jewish antiquity as “Greek.”¹⁴ We can only surmise that both charges were brought forward by Romans, as well, but it is clearly most convenient for Josephus to direct his counterattacks against Egyptians of poor character and Greeks of recent origin. So far, Josephus’ “Greek” critics seem suspicious.

Josephus’ anonymous critics

This brings us to the third point, namely Josephus’ failure to identify his critics. He is clearly referring to criticism that has emerged during the few years that has passed since the publication of *Antiquities*. We should hardly expect literary evidence from within such a limited time span. And Josephus may have had good reasons not to name his critics. From “convenience or cowardice,” as Aryeh Kasher puts it,¹⁵ Josephus probably wished to avoid confrontation with more influential and powerful antagonists.¹⁶ In other words, Josephus’ anonymous critics alert us about the importance of his rhetorical strategies, but this point is mostly insignificant as evidence against the veracity of Josephus’ claims that his critics have dismissed the notion of Jewish antiquity.

Jewish Antiquity and Josephus’ Rhetorical Strategies

What, then, about Droge’s claim that the questioning of Jewish antiquity serves as a “necessary ... fiction,” because “it provided a pretext for his chronological argument in defense of Moses’ unparalleled antiquity”? In fact, Josephus’ ardent and extensive defense of Jewish antiquity, which covers most of the first part of *Against Apion* (1.1–218), simply does not fulfill the function assigned to it by Droge. In this part of the treatise there is no “chronological argument in defense of Moses’ unparalleled antiquity.” Josephus’ main point throughout this first part is to prove the antiquity of the Jews, but not their “unparalleled antiquity.” This emerges from the attacks on Greek historiography, from the association of Jewish historiography to that of Egypt, Phoenicia and Babylonia, from the attempt to explain the silence of most Greek authors about the Jews, and from the quotations from Egyptian, Phoenician and Babylonian sources accompanied by detailed discussions of chronology (*Apion* 1.103–105, 108, 126–127; cf. 2.15–19). All these points underscore Josephus’ general claims for Jewish antiquity, but only at the expense of the Greeks. The antiquity of the Egyptian, Phoenician and Babylonian cultures is presupposed. Josephus never makes any attempt to argue that the Jewish civilization is more ancient than any of those.

¹⁴ See e.g. Haaland 2006a, 209–230.

¹⁵ Kasher 1996, 152.

¹⁶ Kasher 1996, 151–152, suggests that Josephus is referring to both Roman and Greek authors and names Tacitus, Quintilian, Martial, Juvenal, Epictetus, Plutarch and others as possible candidates. According to Gruen 2005, 32, Barclay’s commentary on *Against Apion* (which had not yet appeared when this article was written) similarly “leaves open to possibility that Josephus refers to Romans who give credence to Greek historians.” As Gruen correctly notes, *Apion* 1.15 implies that Josephus’ critics are Greeks, but in my view, this passage does not settle the case conclusively.

Of course, the chronological superiority of the Jewish civilization compared to that of the Greeks is an important premise for his later claims about “unparalleled antiquity,” but this more daring point is made only in the final part of *Against Apion* (2.145–296). And this point is not established by any “chronological argument,” but mainly by narrative and rhetorical means. First, we should observe how Egypt and all her hosts disappear from *Against Apion* by the death of Apion, which is recorded with scorn and rudeness to the maximum of Josephus’ capacity (*Apion* 2.144).¹⁷ Moses, on the other hand, leads the Israelites out of Egypt and through the desert (*Apion* 2.157–158), and provides for them the best laws possible (*Apion* 2.158–161). Hence Moses and the Jews are left behind as the sole representatives of the ancient Orient in the final part of the treatise.¹⁸

At this point there is a conspicuous difference between the first and the final part of *Against Apion*: At the outset, the Egyptian culture, accompanied by that of Phoenicians and Babylonians, is presented as an ancient civilization from which the Greeks have learned (*Apion* 1.8–14). In the final part of the treatise (*Apion* 2.145–296), however, the Jewish culture takes on this role alone (*Apion* 2.154, 168, 255–257, 279–286, 293–295). Quite conspicuously, Josephus provides no cross-reference back to his previous chronological argument.¹⁹ Even if Josephus could successfully make a chronological argument for Jewish antiquity, he could hardly prove chronologically that Moses was the first of all legislators (*Apion* 2.154) and the Jewish culture the source of all civilizations (*Apion* 2.293–295). Instead of involving himself in futile argumentation, Josephus makes his case for Jewish supreme antiquity by sophisticated, rhetorical means.

Another element in Josephus’ argument contributes to placing Moses and the Jews in this position, namely the way he narrows the motive of Greek dependence upon barbarians, which appears already at the outset of *Against Apion* (1.14), to the dependence of Greek philosophers upon Moses mainly regarding the perception of God (*Apion* 2.168, 255, 281). Within the context of philosophical theology, there is no room—or need—for Egyptians, Phoenicians and Babylonians. Only the Jews could reasonably be presented as the source of the abstract concepts of the deity propounded by several Greek schools of philosophy.²⁰

Thus, it turns out that the first part of *Against Apion* (1.1–218) makes little sense if the questioning of Jewish antiquity was fabricated by Josephus himself. Contrary to Droge’s claim, such a fiction—no matter how convenient—would by no means be necessary. Josephus’ detailed argument for Jewish antiquity would rather be disturbing and pointless if the opposite case were unthinkable and incredible; only if the questioning of Jewish antiquity were a real challenge would Josephus’ argument be necessary.

More on General Plausibility and Josephus’ Rhetorical Strategies

Despite its attractiveness at first sight, the idea that Josephus fabricated the questioning of Jewish antiquity does not appear to be entirely plausible considering the larger argument of which it is a part. Instead, along with Milikowsky, I will pursue an interpretation of *Against Apion* that makes Josephus’ opening words a positive point of departure. It is first of all highly plausible that *Antiquities* caused suspicion and criticism from Greek intellectuals or their supporters. It is also quite likely that such criticism was based largely on the lack of references to the Jews in Greek sources, as Josephus claims. What more can we infer about

¹⁷ Note that the Egyptian priests are spared from this character assassination. See *Apion* 1.140–144. With rhetorical efficiency Josephus pictures them as the keepers of historical records and upholders of ancient tradition in the first part of *Against Apion* (1.1–218), and avoids any mention of their position and functions within the Egyptian cult at the end of the third part. See Barclay 2004, 112.

¹⁸ Egypt only reemerges as Josephus summarizes his argument at the very end of the treatise (*Apion* 2.289).

¹⁹ See Gerber 1997, 98–99; Gerber 1999, 264.

²⁰ See e.g. Kasher 1996, 154.

this “Greek” criticism against *Antiquities*? Droge admits that a “Greek reader of the *Antiquities* might well dispute Josephus’ *description* of Jewish origins.”²¹ John Barclay points to cultural insignificance as a likely focus of Greek criticism, which helps explaining the purpose of Josephus’ Greek evidence toward the end of *Against Apion*’s first part (*Apion* 1.161–218).²² In fact, this material is insignificant in relation to the question of antiquity, but valuable as evidence for Greek respect, admiration and friendliness toward the Jews.

In addition, however, I will argue that it is highly plausible that certain critics—or even “a considerable number,” as Josephus claims (*Apion* 1.2)—simply dismissed Josephus’ account of Jewish history *including* his claims about Jewish antiquity. First, there is no reason to assume that Josephus was the only “intellectual” of his time that did not always stick to strict logic and indisputable arguments.²³ From the point of view of a conservative Roman, the Jews represented a new superstition in the city and Josephus’ claims for Jewish antiquity may have been carelessly dismissed without serious consideration. Second, there was a general skepticism toward exaggerated claims about the antiquity of eastern nations, as Barclay points out.²⁴ Third, Josephus declares in the preface of *Antiquities* that the Jewish “sacred Scriptures ... embrace the history of five thousand years” (*Ant.* 1.13). If this figure is interpreted not as a dating of the creation of the world, but as a dating of the emergence of the Jewish people, it would clearly represent a gross exaggeration. In fact, when Josephus repeats the same number in *Against Apion*, his wording lends itself to exactly this (mis)understanding: “the extreme antiquity of our Jewish race, the purity of the original stock, and the manner in which it established itself in the country which we occupy to-day. That history embraces a period of five thousand years” (*Apion* 1.1). Later in *Against Apion*, however, he gives more precise figures: He estimates the period “from the birth of man down to the death of the lawgiver” to be “only a little short of three thousand years” (*Apion* 1.39) and the subsequent Jewish history to be two thousand years (1.36; 2.226). This corresponds fairly well with his claim that the exodus “preceded the Trojan War by nearly a thousand years” (*Apion* 1.104). Yet I see no reason to doubt that even these more moderate figures could instigate objections from Josephus’ contemporaries, just as they certainly would from modern scholars.²⁵

No Evidence for the Questioning of Jewish Antiquity?

My remaining points take issue with the contention that, apart from *Against Apion* 1.2, there is no evidence for the questioning of Jewish antiquity in the extant sources.

First, Goodman points out an interesting parallel in Origin’s *Against Celsus*.²⁶ Apparently, Celsus considered the notion of Jewish antiquity ridiculous, shameless and undocumented:

They shamelessly undertook to trace their genealogy back to the first offspring of sorcerers and deceivers ... in spite of the fact that throughout the length of past history such an idea has never even been claimed ... yet now the Jews make claims about

²¹ Droge 1996, 118 (original emphasis).

²² Barclay 2005b, 32.

²³ Several studies of Josephus’ rhetoric in *Against Apion* have demonstrated that his argumentation is more impressive by its power than convincing by its logic and consistency. See e.g. Schäublin 1982, 318–321, 326–328; S. Cohen 1988, 4–9; Van Henten and Abusch 1996, 307–309; Barclay 1998, 221; Barclay 2005a, 325, 331; K. Jones 2005. The comprehensive argumentation analysis of *Apion* 2.145–296 in Gerber 1997, 122–255, also points out certain shortcomings and flaws. See e.g. Gerber 1997, 176.

²⁴ Barclay 2005b, 38–39.

²⁵ See Foakes Jackson 1930, 20; Goode 1935, 25. This obvious point has been neglected by recent scholarship.

²⁶ See Goodman 1999, 52; cf. e.g. Feldman 1990, 108–115.

them in answer to certain others. (*Cels.* 4.33, 35)²⁷

Just like Josephus, Origen challenges both the cultural hegemony of the Greek tradition in general and the chronological argument of his antagonist in particular (*Cels.* 4.33–36).

The second point relates to the chronological argument of Josephus' antagonists. According to Josephus, Apion "dates the exodus to the seventh Olympiad, and in the first year of that Olympiad" (*Apion* 2.17). As H. St. John Thackeray notes, this brings us to the middle of the eighth century B.C.E.,²⁸ which would make the establishment of the Jewish nation a relatively recent event, even according to Greek standards. The dating of the exodus to the reign of Bocchoris by Lysimachus (preserved in *Apion* 1.305) and Tacitus (*Hist.* 5.3) also most likely points toward the eighth century B.C.E.²⁹

Third, Josephus presupposes skepticism toward Jewish antiquity already in *Antiquities*, as I have noted elsewhere.³⁰ In his speech to Agrippa concerning the rights of the Ionian Jews, Nicolaus of Damascus makes the following claim: "Now our customs are excellent in themselves, if one examines them carefully, and they are also ancient, even though some may not believe this" (*Ant.* 16.44). Hence the questioning of Jewish antiquity is clearly not a feature that Josephus conveniently invents for the sake of his argument in *Against Apion*. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that Jewish claims for antiquity in general, and the claims of Josephus in *Antiquities* in particular, were indeed subject to an amount of doubt and criticism.

A Convenient Point of Departure, Not a Necessary Fiction

This way of reasoning can be summarized by rephrasing the evaluation of Droge quoted above: Josephus' reference to a "considerable number" of Greeks (or people that trusted Greek historiography) that doubted the antiquity of the Jews was *an urgent and convenient starting point*. It was urgent because antiquity was equal with significance, prominence and honor in Josephus' world.³¹ And as Droge correctly remarks, it was convenient because the relative lateness of Greek culture was an easy target.³²

Abandoning the Greeks

If we assume that *Against Apion*—at least partly—was caused by criticism against *Antiquities* from Greeks or from Romans that treasured the Greek culture (at least as long as it served their criticism of Josephus), not only the extensive defense of Jewish antiquity at the expense of the Greeks in the first part of the treatise (*Apion* 1.1–218) makes sense; we may even be close to a reasonable explanation for the rather comprehensive anti-Greek rhetoric of the final part (*Apion* 2.145–296). Apparently, Josephus' previous attempts to present Jewish culture on Greek premises in *Antiquities* did not succeed.³³ We may easily envisage how he may have been dismissed by influential Greeks, or by more or less philhellene Romans. As a result, Josephus abandons his previous strategy. Instead of making attempts to picture Jews and

²⁷ Quoted from Chadwick 1965, 209–211.

²⁸ See comment in the margin *ad locum* and footnote to *Apion* 2.156.

²⁹ See e.g. Thackeray's footnote to *Apion* 1.305; Stern 1974–1978, 1:385; 2:35–36.

³⁰ See Haaland 2002, 55–56.

³¹ See e.g. *Apion* 2.151; Droge 1996, 125.

³² See the similar statement by Gruen 2005, 41: "It certainly allowed Josephus to discredit the idea quite easily and unequivocally. A neat set-up."

³³ In *Antiquities*, Josephus treats the Greeks politely and favorably from the very beginning to the very end, with a nasty comment in *Ant.* 1.121 as the only exception. In general, Greek culture serves as a positive point of reference and standard of measurement. See e.g. Haaland 2002, 53–54, 56; Haaland 2006a, 229; Haaland 2006b, 272, 284.

Judaism in Greek dress as in *Antiquities*, he frames *Against Apion* as a presentation of his native culture in Roman terms.³⁴

Josephus' Audience—Benevolent or Skeptical?

Steve Mason has repeatedly argued that Josephus addresses an audience of benevolent gentiles throughout his writings.³⁵ However, if our present interpretation of *Against Apion* in general and its opening lines in particular is correct, if Josephus' claims about Jewish antiquity in *Antiquities* was indeed subject to serious criticism, then we encounter a reader response of a totally different nature than the one Mason has envisioned. And nonetheless, Josephus continues to address exactly the same kind of audience. This ambiguity precludes any clear and simple conclusion about the attitude of Josephus' audience toward his message.³⁶

Even if I have presently argued for an "at face value" reading of *Against Apion* 1.2, I would definitely not recommend such an approach as a general rule within Josephan scholarship.

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³⁴ The Roman character and context of *Contra Apionem* is emphasized in much recent scholarship. See e.g. Goodman 1994, 334–335; Goodman 1999; Haaland 1999; Haaland 2005; Barclay 2000; Barclay 2005a. I am indebted to Professor Oskar Skarsaune for the suggested explanation of this feature.

³⁵ See e.g. Mason 1996; Mason 2000, xvii–xx; Mason 2001, xix–xxi; Mason 2005.

³⁶ For further elaboration, see Haaland 2006a, 243–260, particularly 254–257.

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