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Chapter 6

ABRAHAM IN JOSEPHUS' WRITINGS

Michael Avioz

The figure of Abraham played a prominent role in Abrahamic religions. Every generation has its own image of Abraham, but in all cases the departure point was the biblical narrative. One of the early platforms of the reception history of Abraham is found in the works of the first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus.

Abraham's narrative cycle¹ begins in Genesis 11 and ends in Genesis 25. The approximate sequence of events runs thus: Abram and Sarai journey through Canaan and descend to Egypt (Genesis 12); Abram parts ways with Lot (13); the war of the four kings (14); God makes a covenant with Abram (15); the flight of Hagar (16), the circumcision (17); the angels visit Abraham (18); the destruction of Sodom (19); Abraham and Sarah in Gerar (20); the birth of Isaac and expulsion of Ishmael (21); Abraham and Abimelech's covenant (21); the binding of Isaac (22); Sarah's burial (23); finding a wife for Isaac in Haran (24); Abraham's death (25).² Josephus retells this narrative cycle in *Ant.* 1.149–256.³

1. I will use the forms “Abram” or “Abraham” throughout this paper according to their appearance in the MT. I will use “Abraham” for general reference.

2. See J. Grossman, *Abram to Abraham: A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016).

3. Translations of Josephus are based upon L.H. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities Books 1–4* (Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary 3; Leiden: Brill, 2000). Josephus calls Abraham “Habramos”; he does not distinguish between Abram and Abraham. The LXX calls him Ἀβραμ. Sarai is always Σάρρα in Josephus. Begg explains these omissions in Josephus' wish to spare “such readers elements of Genesis that they would find boring”. See C.T. Begg, “Genesis in Josephus”, in *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, eds. C.E. Evans et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 303–29, here 316. For the appellations of Abraham in Josephus' writings, see P. Spilsbury, *The Image of the Jew in Flavius Josephus' Paraphrase of the Bible* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 55–6. Josephus does not mention Abraham in *Against Apion*. Bar Kochva deduces that this may prove that Josephus did not have at his disposal the work of Hecataeus of Abdera, named “On Abraham”. Had Josephus access to this work, he would have undoubtedly made use of it in his apologetic work and would have mentioned Abraham as well. See B. Bar Kochva, “On Abraham and the Egyptians:

Josephus was not the first Hellenistic Jew to write about Abraham; he was preceded by Demetrius the Chronographer, Cleodemus Malchus, Artapanus, and Philo.⁴ Also, Josephus cites Berosus, Hecataeus, and Nicolaus of Damascus (*Ant.* 1.158–9) as historians who mention Abraham.⁵

Walter Hansen begins his brief review of Abraham in Josephus' writings thus: "The apologetic goals of Josephus are quite obvious in his introduction of Abraham."⁶ Carol Bakhos' review of Abraham's family in Josephus opens similarly: "Though by most accounts the ancient Jewish historian Josephus (37–c. 100 CE) was not an exegete, his history of the Jewish people from the biblical period in his Jewish Antiquities is part of the long trajectory of Jewish scriptural interpretation."⁷

Louis Feldman, a leading Josephus scholar, wrote a comprehensive chapter on Abraham in Josephus' writings. He summarizes Josephus' portrayal of Abraham as follows: "[Josephus aggrandizes] Abraham the philosopher and scientist, the general, the perfect host and guest, and the man of virtue generally."⁸ However, the

A Hellenistic-Greek or a Hellenistic-Jewish Composition", *Tarbiz* 70 (2011): 327–52 (Hebrew). Abraham is briefly referred to in Josephus' *War* 4.531; 5.379–81.

4. See J. S. Siker, "Abraham in Greco-Roman Paganism", *JSJ* 18 (1988): 188–208; B. Bar Kochva, "On Abraham".

5. Louis Ginzberg interweaves rabbinic, Hellenistic, early Christian, kabbalistic, and other textual sources that deal with Abraham. See L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909–38). A second edition was published in 2003 in two volumes (Philadelphia: JPS, 2003). For a comprehensive review of other Jewish compositions rewriting the Abraham narrative, see A. Mühling, *Blickt auf Abraham, euren Vater: Abraham als Identifikationsfigur des Judentums in der Zeit des Exils und des Zweiten Tempels* (FRLANT 236; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011). She mentions *Judith*, *Tobit*, *Maccabees*, *Jubilees*, *Ben Sira*, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, *Pseudo-Philo*, Josephus, the *Testament of Abraham*, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and the NT. For Abraham in the Midrash, see the section "Rabbinic Judaism", in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham*, eds. M. Goodman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010) [203–275]. See also J.L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); N. Calvert-Koyzis, *Paul, Monotheism and the People of God: The Significance of Abraham Traditions for Early Judaism and Christianity* (JSNTSupp 273; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 6–84; A.D. Roitman, "The Traditions about Abraham's Early Life in the Book of Judith (5:6–9)", in *Things Revealed: Studies in Early Jewish and Christian Literature in Honor of Michael E. Stone*, eds. E. Chazon et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 73–87; R.J. Foster, *The Significance of Exemplars for the Interpretation of the Letter of James* (WUNT II, 376; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 59–103.

6. G.W. Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians: Epistolary and Rhetorical Contexts* (JSNTSup 29; Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 193.

7. C. Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Interpretations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 26. My emphasis.

8. L.H. Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 249. The chapter on Abraham in Josephus' writings is from pages 223–89.

question is whether Josephus' main objective in *Antiquities of the Jews* is apologetic. In my book on Josephus' interpretation of Samuel,⁹ I argue that Josephus' central aim is not apologetic but interpretative and that his *Antiquities of the Jews* are classified as "rewritten Scripture", focusing mainly on the interpretive aspects of the biblical text.¹⁰

Philip Alexander has described the characteristics of texts labeled as "rewritten Bible". He defines them as:

1. Narratives that follow a sequential and chronological order.
2. Freestanding works that follow the form of the biblical texts on which they are based.
3. Works not intended to replace the Bible (their authors typically rewrite a significant portion of Scripture while making use of additional legendary material, integrating it within the biblical narrative).
4. Texts which follow the general order of biblical accounts but are selective in what they include.
5. Texts whose intention is to produce an interpretative reading of Scripture by offering "a fuller, smoother and doctrinally more advanced form of the sacred narrative."
6. Texts whose narrative form only allows them to reflect a single interpretation of the original.
7. Whose narrative form also renders it implausible for the writers to offer their exegetical reasoning.
8. Texts which use extra-biblical tradition and non-biblical sources (oral and written), and utilize legendary material by fusing it with the biblical narrative, thereby creating a synthesis of the whole tradition (biblical and non-biblical).¹¹

Moshe Bernstein defines the same approach as "simple sense exegesis" (פשוט).¹² It deals with "difficulties in language, grammar, context, issues which could confront

9. M. Avioz, *Josephus' Interpretation of the Books of Samuel* (Library of Second Temple Studies 86; London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

10. See Avioz, *Josephus' Interpretation*, with earlier literature. See also L. Novakovic, *Raised from the Dead According to Scripture: The Role of Israel's Scripture in the Early Christian Interpretations of Jesus' Resurrection* (London/New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), esp. 28–34. The label "Scripture" was added since there is no "Bible" in Josephus' age.

11. P.S. Alexander, "Retelling the Old Testament", in *It Is Written—Scripture Citing Scripture: Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars*, eds. D.A. Carson et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 99–121, esp. 116–18. Other compositions that are labeled "rewritten Scripture" are: the Palestinian Targums, *Pseudo-Philo*, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, *Jubilees*, and the *Genesis Apocryphon* and some Qumranic compositions.

12. M.J. Bernstein, "4Q252: From Re-Written Bible to Biblical Commentary", *JJS* 45 (1994): 1–27, here 1.

any (rationalist) reader of a given text (as opposed to those which would affect only an ideologically oriented reader) and then attempts to solve them more or less within the parameters and boundaries of the biblical text alone.” The second kind of exegesis, “applied exegesis”, tries to answer non-biblical questions by searching for implicit general principles in the biblical text which can be applied to new situations and problems.¹³

One cannot deny the presence of the apologetic in Josephus’ writings, but it should not be perceived as the main objective of his biblical rewriting. To do so reduces his biblical characterizations to two dimensional symbols of virtue, and drains his writing of its essence; as we shall see below, Josephus has much to offer with regard to biblical exegesis. I will analyze Josephus’ additions, omissions, and changes to the biblical text, and attempt to explain them, arguing that, when Josephus retold the biblical narrative of Abraham, he worked more as an interpreter rather than an apologist. He had in mind Graeco-Roman readers, both Jewish and non-Jewish,¹⁴ not able to read or comprehend the biblical narrative, thus taking the role of a mediator between the reader and the text.

Josephus as an Exegete

Several scholars have discussed Josephus’ exegetical abilities. The biblical exegete’s tasks are, among others¹⁵:

1. To translate the biblical text into a language familiar to its readers.
2. To explain and clarify complicated halakhic issues (issues of Jewish law).
3. To reconcile contradictions in the Hebrew Bible.
4. To address problematic ethical issues that arise in the biblical narrative.
5. To emphasize the relevance of the Hebrew Bible for the contemporary reader.

I will try to show that Josephus makes great efforts to accomplish at least some of these tasks and will focus mainly on points one, three, and four. Josephus had to offer his Greek translation of the Hebrew text, albeit not in full. His work is more than a mere translation, as was already done by the Septuagint. He tried to reconcile contradictions as well as explaining other difficulties arising from the biblical texts. In the following, I will give some examples of Josephus’ methods of interpretation when retelling the biblical narrative of Abraham.

13. See also the literature cited in Avioz, *Josephus’ Interpretation*, 6–7.

14. See the discussion in Avioz, *Josephus’ Interpretation*, 191–5.

15. J.L. Kugel, “Early Interpretation: The Common Background of Late Forms of Biblical Exegesis”, in *Early Biblical Interpretation*, eds. J.L. Kugel and R.A. Greer (Library of Early Christianity, 3; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 9–106.

The reason for Terah's relocation in Genesis 11:31-2 is not given in the biblical narrative,¹⁶ but Josephus (*Ant.* 1.152) fills this gap: "Because Therros came to hate Chaldaia owing to his grief for Aranes, they all emigrated to Charran in Mesopotamia."¹⁷ Similarly, in Gen. 12:1, God mandates Abraham's departure from Ur to Canaan, but there is no allusion to God's word in 11:31, and the decision to move is apparently initiated by Terah and Abraham. In order to solve this tension, Josephus provides two different reasons for Abraham's departure from Ur: "Therros also died and was buried after living 205 years. For already the life expectancy was being shortened and was becoming briefer until the birth of Moyses, after whom God set a limit of life at 120 years, the number that Moyses also happened to live" (*Ant.* 1.152). In this passage, Josephus does not mention God, yet a few lines later he mentions God explicitly: "Since, for these reasons, the Chaldeans and the other Mesopotamians fell into discord against him, he, having decided to emigrate in accordance *with the will and assistance of God*, settled in the land of Chanaanaia. And having settled there he built an altar and offered a sacrifice to God" (*Ant.* 1.157; my emphasis).

This combination of earthly and divine causes also appears in Josephus' retelling of the Jacob narrative: "For, indeed, an abundant presence of great blessings in every respect will await you [Jacob] by virtue of my assistance. For I led Habramos hither from Mesopotamia when he was being driven out by his kinsmen, and made your father prosperous. I shall allot to you a destiny not less than theirs" (*Ant.* 1.281).¹⁸

As a rule, Josephus emphasizes in his *Antiquities of the Jews* the role of providence in the course of history. However, in *The Jewish War* there is more stress on "human foresight or will."¹⁹ In the above example, we have a rare case of a combination of both aspects.

One of the new elements that Josephus introduces in his rewriting of Lot and Abram's relationship, is Abram's adoption of Lot. Genesis 12:4 reads: "and Lot went with him", but earlier, in Genesis 11:31, we are told that "Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran." Josephus explains that Lot joins Abram because Abram adopted Lot as his son (*Ant.* 1.154). This claim is not paralleled in the rabbinic literature, moreover, there is no scholarly consensus as to whether adoption was customary in the Hebrew Bible.²⁰ However, there is no disputing the

16. J. Grossman, *Abram to Abraham: A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016).

17. Mühling, *Blickt auf Abraham*, 297.

18. Cf. Spilsbury, *Image of the Jew*, 62.

19. See J.T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts* (SNTS Monograph Series 76; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 47. See also D.R. Schwartz, "Josephus, Catullus, Divine Providence, and the Date of the Judean War", in *Flavius Josephus: Interpretation and History*, eds. J. Pastor et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 331–52.

20. See M. Avioz, "Josephus's Portrayal of Lot and His Family", *JSP* 16 (2006): 3–13.

fact that this was common practice in the ancient Near East.²¹ According to Sterling, Josephus' intended audience was Eastern Mediterranean Greek Jews and Romans,²² and if so, then his readers were presumably familiar with the practice of adoption.

Genesis 12:10–20, 23 describes Abram and Sarai's²⁴ descent into Egypt. Various questions arise from the story: how can we explain Abram's departure from Canaan to Egypt due to famine when God promised him the land only a few verses earlier? Was Sarai Abram's real sister, or did he lie? What exactly happened between Sarai and Pharaoh? Why was Pharaoh punished? How does Pharaoh learn that Sarai is Abram's wife?²⁵ These questions have been dealt with by scholars in various ways,²⁶ but I shall now examine which questions were dealt with by Josephus.

According to Josephus, Abraham goes to Egypt not only because famine strikes Canaan, but also in order to become acquainted with Egyptian science and religion and to engage in discussions with Egyptian wise men. Josephus characterizes Abraham as the wise man and sage par excellence who taught the Egyptians astronomy, the science for which they eventually became famous (*Ant.* 1.167–8).²⁷ This addition is undoubtedly apologetic, it calculated to promote Judaism as playing a major part in developing the art of astronomy.

Josephus explains that Abram claims that Sarai is his sister because he “fear[s] the frenzy of the Egyptians” (*Ant.* 1.162). This addition is not Josephus' invention, it is supported by Ezek. 23:21: “Thus you longed for the lewdness of your youth, when the Egyptians fondled your bosom and caressed your young breasts.”²⁸ Josephus commends Abram's ploy (τέχνην ἐπενόησε τοιαύτην, *Ant.* 1.162), so does

21. F.W. Knoblock, “Adoption in the Old Testament and ANE”, in *ABD*, Vol. 1, 76–79; H.M. Wahl, “Ester, das adoptierte Waisenkind. Zur Adoption im Alten Testament”, *Bib* 80 (1999): 78–99.

22. G.E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self Definition, Josephus, Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 298–308.

23. For a thorough analysis of the reception of this story in early biblical interpretation, see A. Shinan and Y. Zakovitch, *Abram and Sarai in Egypt, Gen. 12.10–20 in the Bible, the Old Versions and the Ancient Jewish Literature* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1983).

24. For a full analysis of Sarah in Josephus, see J. McDonald, *Searching for Sarah in the Second Temple Era: Portraits in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Narratives* (PhD diss; Brite Divinity School, 2015), 300–67. I would like to thank Dr. McDonald for providing me with a copy of his dissertation.

25. Cf. G. Vermes, *Post-Biblical Jewish Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 67.

26. See e.g., Shinan and Zakovitch, *Abram and Sarai in Egypt*; Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 244–73; Y. Peleg, “Was the Ancestress of Israel in Danger? Did Pharaoh Touch (געט) Sarai?”, *ZAW* 118 (2006): 197–208.

27. See A.Y. Reed, “Abraham as Chaldean Scientist and Father of the Jews: Josephus, *Ant.* 1.154–168, and the Greco-Roman Discourse about Astronomy/Astrology”, *JSJ* 35 (2004): 119–58.

28. For Ezekiel's view of Egypt, see S. Marzouk, *Egypt as a Monster in the Book of Ezekiel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

not present him as a liar, but rather as a clever man taking legitimate action to defend himself.²⁹

Feldman argues that Josephus introduces erotic traits into the biblical narrative by writing that Pharaohes "seized with zeal to behold her, was on the point of laying hands on Sarra" (*Ant.* 1.163). However, it seems to me that Josephus was simply trying to solve a difficult verse: Genesis 20:17 relates that great plagues were inflicted upon Egypt "because of Sarai, Abram's wife" (עַל דְּבַר שָׂרַי). Erotic depictions are found in the *Genesis Apocryphon* (1Q20 20.2–8), while Josephus was merely trying to make the biblical narrative clearer.³⁰ According to Josephus, Pharaoh's priests inform him that Sarai is Abram's wife (*Ant.* 1.164). This addition is probably part of an exegetical tradition, and we find it in *Pseudo-Eupolemus* (Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 9.17.7) and the *Genesis Apocryphon* (col. 20).³¹

Also, Josephus provides a more elaborate description of Abram's military skills than the biblical narrative in Genesis 14,³² portraying Abraham as military leader as well as philosopher and astronomer. Josephus' exegesis continues in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. In his retelling of this narrative (MT Genesis 18–19),³³ Josephus solves an exegetical question: why were these cities destroyed? Josephus writes that the Sodomites were: "overweeningly proud of their populousness and greatness of wealth, were insolent toward men and irreverent toward the Divinity, so that they no longer remembered the advantages that they had received from Him and hated strangers and shunned relations with others" (*Ant.* 1.194). Denouncing the Sodomites of having pride, hating strangers, and arrogance helps readers find the proportionality between their sin and their punishment in a clearer way than is stated in the MT. Josephus may have taken his cue from Ezek. 16:49: "she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy."³⁴

29. For Josephus' treatment of lies, see Avioz, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 76, with earlier literature.

30. Cf. Spilisbury, *Image of the Jew*, 63, n. 48.

31. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 61, n.523. For the *Genesis Apocryphon*, see D.A. Machiela, *The Dead Sea Genesis Apocryphon: A New Text and Translation with Introduction and Special Treatment of Columns 13–17* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

32. See Y. Muffs, "Abraham the Noble Warrior. Patriarchal Politics and Laws of War in Ancient Israel", in idem, *Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), 67–95.

33. On this story see J.A. Loader, *A Tale of Two Cities: Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament, Early Jewish and Early Christian Traditions* (CBET, 1; Kampen: Kok Publishing House, 1990); M. Carden, *Sodomy: A History of a Christian Biblical Myth* (London: Equinox, 2004); E. Noort and E. Tigchelaar, eds., *Sodom's Sins: Genesis 18–19 and its Interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2004). See also Kugel, *Traditions*, 333–4.

34. See Kugel, *Traditions*, 333. Josephus mentions Ezekiel in *Ant.* 10.79. See C.T. Begg, "The 'Classical Prophets' in Josephus' *Antiquities*", *LS* 13 (1988): 341–57 (Repr. in "The Place is too Small for Us: The Israelite Prophets in Recent Scholarship, ed. R.P. Gordon [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995], 547–62).

In retelling Genesis 20 (*Ant.* 1.207–12), Josephus writes that God struck Abimelech with a painful disease (*Ant.* 1.208). Though this is not explicitly stated in the biblical narrative, it is a reasonable inference based on Gen. 20:17; if God cured Abimelech, this implies that he had a disease.³⁵ As in other occurrences, Josephus fills a gap in the biblical narrative.³⁶ Sometimes this gap-filling contributes to a better understanding of these narratives and at other times it is a midrashic-like expansion. In this particular case, his addition is useful.

The Abraham narrative reaches its peak with the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). This narrative raises many questions. Verse 1 opens: “After these things God tested Abraham”: after which things? How can God command Abraham to sacrifice his son? Why does Abraham not question the divine command, or ask how it is consistent with God’s earlier promises? Does Sarah ever learn of this command? Does Isaac remain passive, and how old is he? Why does Abraham bind Isaac? Is this story a model of behavior for future generations?

Josephus views Abraham as a true believer in God and lauds his piety, but avoids answering the question of why Isaac was bound. Instead, he writes that Isakos “rushed to the altar and the slaughter” (*Ant.* 1.232): Isaac’s response precludes the need for binding. According to Josephus, Abraham willingly agrees to sacrifice Isaac, and he does not conceal this command from him. Intriguingly, Josephus is bothered by Sarah’s absence from the narrative, and to this effect, he adds that Abraham concealed God’s command from her (*Ant.* 1.225). This fact went unnoticed by many Second Temple sources,³⁷ and Josephus should be applauded for raising the question while others disregarded it. In Josephus’ retelling, Isaac remains passive; though he does state his willingness to be sacrificed, his role is not emphasized any more than it is in the MT.³⁸ Josephus provides Isaac’s age, a detail missing in the MT; he writes that Isaac “was in his twenty-fifth year” (*Ant.* 1.227). The source of this number is unclear. Feldman

35. Feldman (*Judean Antiquities*, 79, n.640) states that Josephus “used this account with that of Pharaoh (Gen. 12:17), who was beset with great plagues because he had taken Sarah.” See also A-C. Geljon, “Abraham in Egypt: Philo’s Interpretation of Gen 12:10–20,” *Studia Philonica Annual* 28 (2016): 297–319, here 317. In light of my explanation, Feldman and Geljon’s explanation is unnecessary.

36. See e.g., C.T. Begg, “Josephus’ Retelling of 1 Kings 1 for a Graeco-Roman Audience,” *TynBull* 57 (2006): 85–108.

37. See S.P. Brock, “Creating Women’s Voices: Sarah and Tamar in Some Syriac Narrative Poems”, in *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, eds. E. Grypeou et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 125–41, at 130.

38. L.A. Huizenga, *The New Isaac: Tradition and Intertextuality in the Gospel of Matthew* (NovTSup 131; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 123–6. For a different view, see E. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 120–1.

explains that Josephus aims to show that in this scene Isaac is not a young boy, but a grown man.³⁹

The location of Abram's meeting with Melchizedek, and the events of the *Akedah* are not precisely clear in the MT of Genesis 14 and 22, but Josephus specifies that these events took place in Jerusalem. In *Ant.* 1.224 he writes that the *Akedah* took place upon Mount Moriah (εἰς τὸ Μώριον), "the mountain, upon that King David later built the Temple" (*Ant.* 1.226). This description concurs with several Second Temple traditions.⁴⁰

These examples from Genesis 11–22 clearly show that Josephus had an exegetical interest in the Abraham narrative. He is a careful reader, paying attention to small nuances and trying to intrigue his readers with them; he invites them to do the same when reading these narratives in Greek. Yet his interpretation is far from being exhaustive, and he does not answer other questions and difficulties that were raised by other interpreters.

Juxtaposition

The vague biblical text does not always clarify connections between narratives, psalms, or oracles that initially seem unrelated.⁴¹ Yet, the biblical authors and redactors did employ various devices to connect certain scenes or compositions, using association, key words, and others methods.

The narratives in Genesis 14 and 15 are loosely connected through the formula ויהי אחרי כן ("After these things"),⁴² but Josephus offers a more meaningful connection: "And God, extolling his virtue, said, 'But you shall not lose the rewards that it is worthy for you to receive for such good deeds'" (*Ant.* 1.181). He also connects the narratives in chs 15 and 16. His retelling of Genesis 15 ends with the following:

39. Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation*, 275–6. In *Jubilees* 17:15, Isaac is said to be 23 years old in this scene. Feldman rightly dismisses the view that Josephus was trying to depict Isaac as a voluntary martyr facing death with joy like an adult warrior, since the age of 25 was the minimum for active military service (pp. 276–7, n. 122).

40. See Kugel, *Traditions*, 320–2.

41. See, most recently, R. Gilmour, *Juxtaposition and the Elisha Cycle* (LHBOTS, 594; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014). See also A. Shinan, and Y. Zakovitch, "Why is 'A' Placed Next to 'B'? Juxtaposition in the Bible and Beyond", in *Tradition, Transmission, and Transformation from Second Temple Literature through Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity*, eds. M. Kister et al. (STDJ 113; Leiden: Brill, 2015), 322–42; Y. Zakovitch, "Juxtaposition in the Abraham Cycle", in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, eds. D.P. Wright et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 509–24.

42. On this formula, see B.L. Harmelink, *Exploring the Syntactic, Semantic, and Pragmatic Uses of ויהי in Biblical Hebrew* (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2004).

Habramos was dwelling near the oak called Ogyges⁴³ (it is a place in Chananaia not far from the city of the Hebronites), and being distressed at his wife's not becoming pregnant, he besought God to grant him offspring of a male child.

Ant. 1.186

This paragraph is an addition to Genesis 15, based on the MT to Gen. 15:3: "And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir'". Moving the verse from its original place helps Josephus connect chs 15 and 16, while in the opening of his retelling of Genesis 16, Josephus writes: "When God encouraged him to be confident, as in all other things he had been led from Mesopotamia for his wellbeing, so also he would have children, Sarra, at God's command, caused him to lie down with one of her handmaidens, Agare by name, who was an Egyptian by race, so that he might procreate children by her" (*Ant.* 1.187).

These chapters are thus connected through the theme of anxiety regarding Abram's and Sarai's heir. Another advantage of this change is that it places emphasis on Abram: it is he who prayed to the Lord, not Sarai.⁴⁴ In his retelling of Genesis 21, Josephus adds that "Not long afterwards a son was born to Habramos from Sarra" (*Ant.* 1.213); this is a way of connecting ch. 20 to ch. 21, a connection that is lacking in the biblical narrative.

We are largely familiar with juxtaposition from rabbinic literature and in the later Jewish medieval commentary of the Bible. Yet, in the aforementioned examples we have seen that Josephus preceded them, and was aware of the exegetical problem of the connections between adjacent narratives, a riddle that still puzzles modern scholars and commentators.

Omissions

Omissions may be the result of several factors. Shaye Cohen⁴⁵ writes that Josephus freely omits whatever he does not need. This includes long lists of Semitic names and embarrassing incidents, such as Reuben and Bilhah; Judah and Tamar; the golden calf; and the complaint of Aaron and Miriam against Moses' wife. Josephus also condenses technical material (the laws and rituals of the Pentateuch) and uninteresting details (the complications of the apportionment of Canaan among the tribes).

43. For this addition, see Feldman, *Judean Antiquities Books 1–4*, 70, n. 584; A.D. Tropper, *Rewriting Ancient Jewish History: The History of the Jews in Roman Times and the New Historical Method* (London/New York: Routledge, 2016), 66.

44. Tropper, *Rewriting*, 67.

45. S.J.D. Cohen, *Josephus in Galilee and Rome: His Vita and Development as a Historian* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 37.

When it comes to the Abraham narrative, Josephus omits several portions from Genesis 15, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, and 24, including any reference to the dreams described in Gen. 13:14-17 and Genesis 15.⁴⁶ Josephus also significantly abridges God and Abraham's extensive dialogue about Sodom's fate in Gen. 18:16-33 (*Ant.* 1.199–200), which may be due to his reservations about anthropomorphic language.⁴⁷

Josephus, in addition, omits the scene with Abraham and Abimelech in Gen. 21:22-33 and the genealogical list in Gen. 22:20-24. He also omits Abraham's negotiations with Ephron for the Machpela cave (Genesis 23), possibly because he does not consider it important. In this, he misses the narrative's great significance, as summarized by Sarna: "Machpelah is the first piece of real estate in the promised land secured by the founding father of the nation; its acquisition presages the future possession of the entire land; all three patriarchs and three matriarchs were interred in the cave."⁴⁸

Various scholars have argued that Josephus deliberately omits the idea of God's covenant regarding the possession of Canaan in his rewriting of the Pentateuch. Elsewhere, I have refuted this claim, however, arguing that there is no meaningful difference between Josephus and the Bible in this regard.⁴⁹

In another omission, Josephus fails to mention that Abraham serves the angels both meat and dairy products (Gen. 18:8). In contrast to Begg,⁵⁰ I do not think that this exclusion was calculated to prevent his readers' being scandalized, given that the prohibition of mixing milk and meat was not necessarily widespread in the Second Temple era. This restriction does appear in the Talmudic literature, but not in Philo (*Virt.*, 143–44), Josephus, or Qumran.⁵¹

46. Th.W. Franxman, *Genesis and the Jewish Antiquities of Flavius Josephus* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1979), 137, adds also 26:2-5, 24; 31:3, 11-13; 35:9-12. See also R. Gnuse, *Dreams and Dream Reports in the Writings of Josephus: A Traditio-Historical Analysis* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 145.

47. See Loader, *Sodom*, 102.

48. N.M. Sarna, "Genesis Chapter 23: The Cave of Machpelah", *HS* 23 (1982): 17–21, here 17.

49. See M. Avioz, "Josephus' Land Theology: A Reappraisal", in *The Gift of the Land and the Fate of the Canaanites in Jewish Thought*, eds. K. Berthelot et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 36–49.

50. Begg, "Genesis in Josephus", 316; Cf. Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation*, 286, n.150.

51. See D. Kraemer, *Jewish Eating and Identity through the Ages* (London: Routledge, 2007), 37: "In all probability, observant Jews did not cook young animals in the milk of their own mothers. But they ate meat prepared with dairy without compunction." Cf. C. Werman and A. Shemesh, "The Halakha in the Dead Sea Scrolls", in *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, eds. M. Kister et al. (Jerusalem: Yad ben Zvi, 2009), 423–4; P.W. van der Horst, *Studies in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 21–9.

Thus, the nature of omitted narratives in Josephus is not meaningful; the reader can still get a good idea of who Abraham was, and what were his great deeds.

Doublets

One of the most well-known features of Genesis relates to its repetition of narratives with a similar plotline. Nicol summarizes this issue as follows:

Best known, perhaps, are the doublets where one of the patriarchs travelling abroad pretends that his wife is his sister, thereby coming into conflict (whether actual or potential) with the ruler of the land in which he finds himself (12:10-20; 20; 26:7-11), the stories which tell of the meeting of a traveler with a woman beside a well (24:10-14; 29:1-14 and Exod. 2:15-21), and the stories concerning the expulsion of Hagar.⁵²

16 and 21:8-21

When confronting doublets, Josephus generally takes one of three different exegetical approaches:

1. Synthesizing the multiple versions into one: in both Genesis 17–18 Abraham is promised a son, but the parents are sceptical (Gen. 17:15-21; 18:10-14). In *Ant.* 1.191–3, Josephus condenses the narratives in Genesis 17–18: Abraham was not sceptical, but rather inquired (πυνθάνομαι) about Ishmael. He refers to Sarah's "smiling" in *Ant.* 1.198 and again in *Ant.* 1.213, and does not repeat the announcement of Isaac's impending birth. Thus Genesis 18 is not redundant, but rather focuses on Sarah's forthcoming pregnancy and her reaction to it.
2. Omitting one of the repeating stories: in such a case, Josephus chooses which one to omit, thus avoiding repetition. Wife-sister stories appear in Genesis 12, 20, and 26, but he does not retell the episode in Genesis 26.⁵³ It may be that Josephus considers it strange for the same event to occur three times.
3. Considering the stories as separate and different: in his retelling of the Hagar stories in Genesis 16 and 21, Josephus describes both (*Ant.* 1.186–90, 215–19), presumably because they are sufficiently different. For example, in Genesis 16 Hagar chooses to flee, while in Genesis 21 it is Sarah who demands Hagar's expulsion.⁵⁴

52. G.G. Nicol, "Story-patterning in Genesis", in *Text as Pretext: Essays in Honour of Robert Davidson*, ed. R.P. Carroll (Sheffield: JSOT Press), 215–33, here 223. On doublets in general, see the literature cited in M. Avioz, *Josephus' Interpretation*, 167–75.

53. See Franxman, *Genesis*, 177–8.

54. For further differences between the two stories, see T. Desmond Alexander, *Abraham in the Negev: A Source Critical Investigation of Genesis 20:1–22:19* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 52–69.

Contradictions

One of the exegetical problems in Genesis 15 relates to chronology. Gen. 15:13 states that the Israelites will stay 400 years in Egypt, while in Exod. 12:40, the number is 430. In his rewriting of Exod. 12:40, Josephus writes that Israel "left Egypt in the month of Xanthikos on the fifteenth according to the lunar reckoning, 430 years after our forefather Habramos came to Chanaanai, Iakobos' departure to Egypt having occurred 215 years later".⁵⁵ In his rewriting of Genesis 15, however, he mentions 400 years, as in the MT. He apparently felt unable to reconcile these verses.

Another contradiction is found in Gen. 16:11, where the angel tells Hagar to call her child Ishmael, while 16:15 assigns the name giving to Abram. Instead Josephus credits neither the angel nor Abram with naming Ishmael, but rather states that "she [Agare, Hagar] gave birth to Ismaelos; someone might render it 'heard by God,' because God had listened to her entreaty" (*Ant.* 1.189).

In Gen. 18:20-21 the order of events is problematic: God determines to punish Sodom and Gomorrah in v. 20, but v. 21 then implies that God will descend to investigate the cities before making a decree. Josephus avoids any contradiction by simply writing: "Therefore, indignant at this behavior, God decided to punish them for their overweening contempt and to raze their city" (*Ant.* 1.195); moreover, this phrasing helps Josephus avoid anthropomorphism.⁵⁶

Modern readers may not be persuaded by Josephus' solutions to the contradictions inherent in the Abraham narrative, but even so, one is impressed by his sensitivity to the subtleties of biblical narrative. He offers harmonistic solutions, thus presenting smoother versions of the narratives.

Josephus' Changes as the Product of His Cultural Background

Since Josephus lived in a Graeco-Roman milieu, it is to be expected that he will have been influenced by these circumstances, and change, add, or omit details that reflect this when retelling the biblical narratives. Louis Feldman devotes in each of his dealings with Josephus' retelling of the Bible, a section on Hellenization.⁵⁷

Feldman deems Josephus' retelling of the *Akedah* "a supreme example of Hellenization."⁵⁸ Josephus psychologized (Abraham "loved exceedingly" Isaac,

55. B.Z. Wacholder, "How Long Did Abram Stay in Egypt? A Study in Hellenistic, Qumran, and Rabbinic Chronology", *HUCA* 35 (1964): 43-56.

56. See C.H. Von Heijne, *The Messenger of the Lord in Early Jewish Interpretations of Genesis* (BZAW, 412; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010). She emphasizes also the omission of the role of the angel in the story of Hagar.

57. See e.g., Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation*, 171-214.

58. *Ibid.*, 266.

Ant. 1.222) and rationalized the biblical story, and added both drama and human emotions.⁵⁹ Feldman notes that:

There are several striking parallels between Isaac and Iphigenia, notably in the enthusiasm with which they both approach the sacrifice and, in particular, in Isaac's statement that he could not even consider rejecting God's decision (*Ant.* 1.232) and Iphigenia's observation, that she, a mortal woman, cannot stand in the way of the goddess (Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis* 396). There is pathetic irony in the fact that Abraham seeks happiness only through his son, who, paradoxically, is about to be sacrificed, just as there is irony in the Chorus's ode (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 590–91) that begins, "Oh! oh! great happiness of the great!" One may also note the remarkable addition to the biblical narrative in which G-d declares that He gave His order to Abraham "from no craving for human blood" (*Ant.* 1.233), which is clearly in contrast to the statement of Artemis, who is said to rejoice in human sacrifices.

Iphigenia at Aulis 1524–25⁶⁰

While I concur with Feldman that the retelling of the *Akedah* has some Hellenistic traits,⁶¹ to call it a "supreme example" of such is an exaggeration,⁶² after all, the midrashic treatment of the story extends far beyond Josephus' elaboration. Feldman's argument that the midrashim focus solely on theodicy and analogies with the book of Job is unconvincing;⁶³ more accurately, they deal with a wide range of exegetical issues, some of which are also discussed by Josephus.

However, the most problematic issue is the parallels that Feldman cites. He cannot, apparently, prove that Josephus created these parallels, and one is inclined

59. See F. Mirguet, *An Early History of Compassion: Emotion and Imagination in Hellenistic Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 38; Begg, "Genesis in Josephus", 311.

60. Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation*, 176.

61. Such as emphasizing emotions: Josephus knows how Abraham felt after God's decree. He dramatizes the biblical scene, emphasizing Abraham's love for his son; he also adds logic to the dialogues between Abraham and Isaac. All of these may be deemed Hellenistic traits.

62. Another example relates to Feldman's argument (*Josephus's Interpretation*, 257) that Josephus made great efforts to indicate that "the place was mount Moriah, since in Greek *μωριαν* means 'folly,' and 'mountain of folly' might evoke mocking from Greek readers." This is an extremely complex explanation; a more likely, straightforward, one is that it is an exegetical tradition that the *Akedah* took place in Jerusalem. In general, one may find echoes of the Hellenistic world, but sometimes Feldman seems to push the case too far. It is doubtful whether Josephus makes any allusions to specific Greek tragedies or Homeric literature. Cf. Spilsbury, *Image of the Jew*, 32, 186–7.

63. See Kugel, *Traditions*, 300–26.

to view them as artificial and forced. Josephus may have known Greek authors, but that is simply not enough to prove that he shaped his retelling in a way that the Greek or Roman reader would be aware of such parallels.⁶⁴

The exemplary character of Abraham might raise the impression that Josephus had a missionary goal, namely to attract potential proselytes among his pagan readers. This issue is much debated and goes beyond the scope of my inquiry, but we need to differentiate between *Ant.* 1–11 and Josephus' other writings. While in *Against Apion* and in *Ant.* 12–20 we may find a favorable attitude towards converts, this is not the case in the first half of *Antiquities of the Jews*, specifically when the Abraham narrative is concerned.⁶⁵

Finally, a point to note is that Josephus' characterization of Abraham as an astronomer⁶⁶ and monotheist is a product of his times and environment. According to Josephus (*Ant.* 1.157), Abraham leaves Ur because his countrymen are angered by his independent monotheistic beliefs, which he reaches after careful astronomical and astrological consideration. In Josephus' (*Ant.* 1.155) retelling, Abraham "was the first who dared to declare that God was the one craftsman of the universe." Throughout his writing, Josephus emphasizes the topic of monotheism in Judaism in contrast with polytheistic beliefs.⁶⁷ To be the first to develop an idea, or achieve in an area, was considered significant in the Roman world, and this explains Josephus' emphasis on Abraham being the first. Emphasizing astronomy as a wisdom transferred by Abraham helps Josephus in presenting Judaism as contributing to world culture;⁶⁸ Josephus argues that it is the Chaldeans rather than the Egyptians who invented astronomy and astrology. This addition is not based on the biblical text, and seems calculated to present Abraham as a universal hero and the Jews as the source of celebrated sciences.⁶⁹

64. Spilsbury, *The Image of the Jew*, 186–7 criticized Feldman who claimed that there are parallels between Solomon and Sophocles in Josephus' retelling: "Feldman can point to no substantial verbal similarities between the two accounts, and there are clearly no striking narrative similarities. The character quality similarities he cites are all common-places and hardly cause for speculative schemes" (p. 187).

65. See S. Mason, "The 'Contra Apionem' in Social and Literary Context: An Invitation to Judean Philosophy", in *Josephus' 'Contra Apionem': Studies in Its Character and Context with a Latin Concordance to the Portion Missing in Greek*, eds. L.H. Feldman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 187–228.

66. Bar Kochva, "On Abraham and the Egyptians", 349, n.90 points out that Josephus does not state explicitly that Abraham invented astronomy but that he was an intermediary: Abraham received this wisdom from Babylon and brought it to Egypt (*Ant.* 1.168).

67. See Spilsbury, *The Image of the Jew*, 59; R. Liong-Seng Phua, *Idolatry and Authority. A Study of Corinthians 8.1–11.1 in the Light of the Jewish Diaspora* (London/New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005), 69–76.

68. See Reed, "Abraham as Chaldean Scientist", 127.

69. Reed, "Abraham as Chaldean Scientist".

Conclusion

In *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus depicts Abraham as a wise man, an obedient worshipper, and a philosopher, astronomer, and military commander. Josephus did not invent these traits, as such qualities are mentioned in the Bible, for example: obedience, righteousness, peacefulness (Genesis 13); hospitality (Gen. 18:1-8); and faith in God (Gen. 15, 22). In his rewriting of the Abraham narrative, Josephus simply emphasized and developed these traits. In his encomium, Josephus writes that Abraham was a “man outstanding in every virtue who had been deservedly honored by God because of his zeal in His service” (*Ant.* 1.256).

According to Martin Goodman, Josephus missed the opportunity to emphasize the idea that Abraham was “the source of blessings to the whole world to be known to his Gentile readers.”⁷⁰ However, even though this was not his purpose, then Josephus’ project should still be considered a success. As an exegetical project, his retelling can be considered an achievement because it clarifies the text for his readers.

The existence of the apologetic in Josephus’ retelling cannot be denied, but what I have tried to show is that his exegetical motivation is more inherent than some scholars assume. Though there are some imprints of Graeco-Roman influence upon Josephus’ writing, most of his retelling of the Abraham cycle is motivated by exegetical concerns. He omitted unimportant details, settled contradictions, and made efforts to make the biblical narrative of Abraham more readable and smooth. Josephus was not writing a biography of, or an apology on, Abraham.

70. M. Goodman, “Josephus on Abraham and the Nations”, in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham*, eds. M. Goodman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 177–83, here 183. Cf. J.R. Wisdom, *Blessing for the Nations and the Curse of the Law: Paul’s Citation of Genesis and Deuteronomy in Gal 3.8–10* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 82–6.