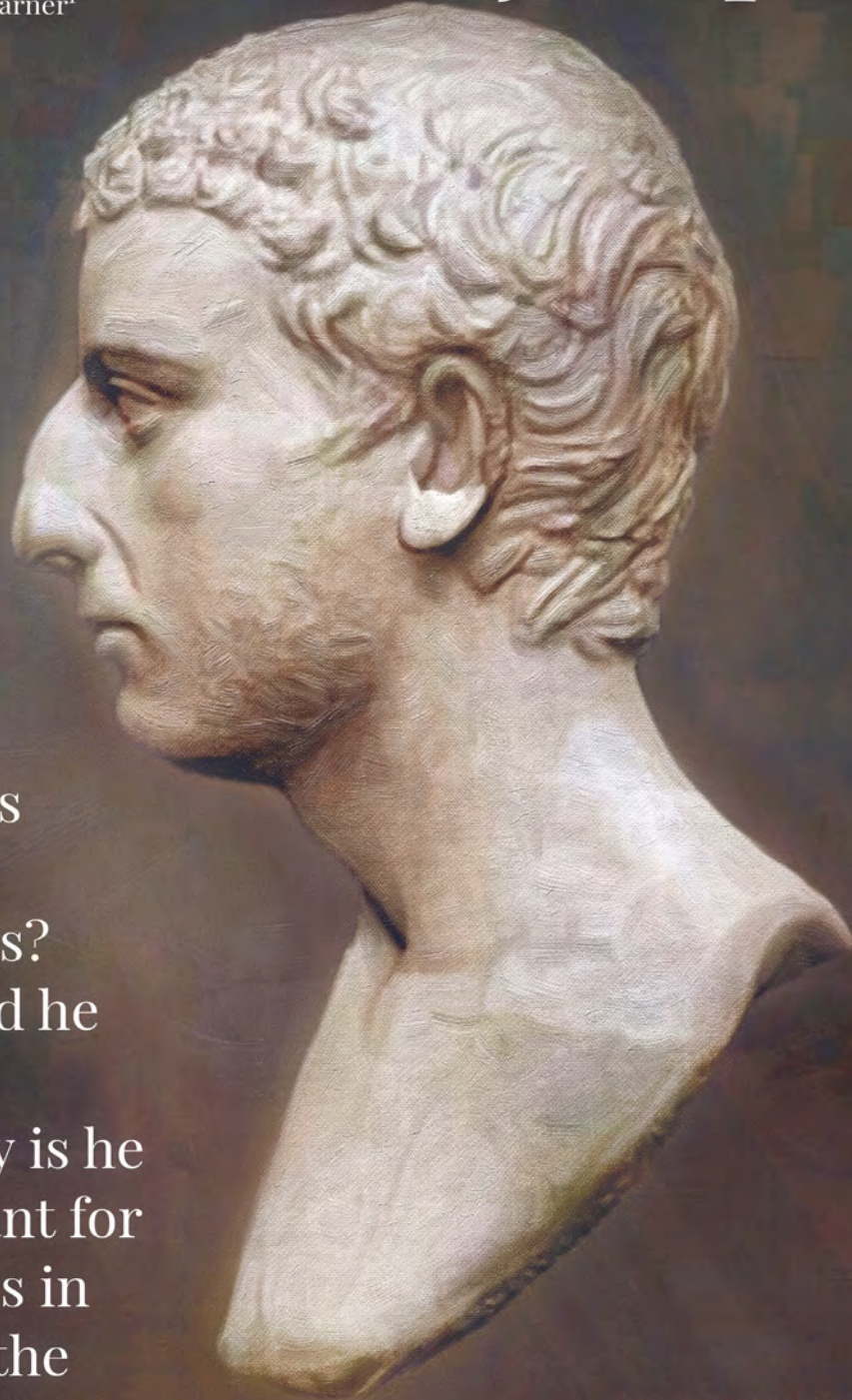




Messiah and Josephus

by Dr. William Varner¹



Who was
Flavius
Josephus?
What did he
write?
And why is he
important for
believers in
Yeshua the
Messiah?

Bust discovered in Rome and
thought to be that of Josephus.



If we want to understand the Jewish background and context of Yeshua the Messiah, it is helpful to understand what Jews in the first century believed. As the Bible reader moves from Malachi to Matthew, he encounters many new ideas, movements, and institutions never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. In the Gospels, for example, one reads about synagogues, Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Romans. These words and many others never appeared before in the Scriptures. One may also learn that the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and Aramaic while the New Testament was written in Greek. One may wonder how such new ideas and changes took place.

The answers to these questions lie in an understanding of the Intertestamental Period, generally referred to by Jews as the “Second Temple Period,” covering the time from approximately 400 B.C. to A.D. 1. A popular book on this period was written by H.A. Ironside and is titled *The Four Hundred Silent Years*. However, the period was anything but “silent” since an enormous number of events took place, giving birth to many movements, all of which serve as a rich background to the later events of New Testament times. The word “silent” refers to the fact that the prophetic voice was silent during this period, a fact also recognized by Jewish writers.

How can we discover what happened during these tumultuous yet fascinating years? Much of the

answer to that question lies in the most thorough source for information about this period of time: the writings of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus.

A few hundred years ago, nearly every Christian household had, alongside the King James Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the Whiston translation of Josephus’s works. The tiny print and the crowded format of that edition, however, still deter even the most determined readers today. An excellent introduction for the modern reader is *Josephus: The Essential Works* by Paul Maier (Kregel, 1995).

So, who was Flavius Josephus? What did he write? And why is he important for believers in Yeshua the Messiah?

Who Was Josephus?

Josephus was born around A.D. 37, just a few years after the death and resurrection of Yeshua. His Hebrew name was Yosef ben Matityahu, indicating that he came from one of the best-known priestly families in Jerusalem. His mother was descended from the Hasmonean dynasty, which was more popularly known as “the Maccabees.”

Josephus’s own description of his childhood reveals perhaps more of his conceit than the facts: “While still a mere boy, about fourteen years old, I won universal applause for my love of letters; insomuch that the chief priests and the leading men of the city constantly came to me for precise

information on some particular in our ordinances” (Life, page 1).

Later on, Josephus investigated the teachings of the three main Jewish “philosophies” of his day: those of the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Pharisees. Consequently, his writings have become one of the main sources on the beliefs of these important groups. At the age of eighteen, Josephus joined the Pharisees.

After a visit to Rome, at the beginning of the Jewish rebellion against the Romans, he returned to Judea. He was soon made commander of the military forces in Galilee and began to prepare for the inevitable invasion of the Roman legions. In A.D. 67, Josephus’s forces were besieged by Vespasian’s army at a Galilean fortress called Jotapata. Rather than surrender, the last ten survivors agreed to kill each other by drawing lots. But when Josephus and one other remained, he persuaded his companion that they should surrender to the Romans and hope for mercy.

Josephus soon predicted that his captor, Vespasian, would be elevated as the emperor of Rome, an event that indeed transpired two years later. For the remainder of the war, Josephus accompanied Vespasian (and later Vespasian’s son Titus) until Jerusalem was conquered and burned in A.D. 70. Therefore, he was an eyewitness to the tragic events that transpired and has provided us with a firsthand account as an ancient Jewish “war correspondent.”

Following the war, Josephus received Roman citizenship and took

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Vespasian's family name, Flavius. He was provided a villa near Rome, where he spent the rest of his days writing historical, biographical, and apologetic works before dying near the end of the century.

Estimates of Josephus's character mostly center around his questionable behavior during his capture by the Romans. It should also be noted that Josephus's own explanation of his actions is quite self-serving. Because he "went over" to Rome, the lasting attitude of Jews toward him for centuries has been one of disdain. However, while he always praised the deeds of his Roman patrons, he also defended the Jewish Scriptures and beliefs and never renounced his own Pharisaic faith. He blamed the rebellion on the "hotheads" among the Jewish-revolutionary types who plunged a gentle, peace-loving peo-

ple into the destructive cauldron of a no-win war with Rome.

Whatever the true estimation of Josephus's character is, it is recognized that without his writings our knowledge of first-century Israel would be greatly inferior. Josephus the man remains an enigma. Josephus the writer deserves our deepest appreciation.

What Did He Write?

Josephus composed four different works. One is biographical; one is apologetic; two are historical.

The Life: This is not a true autobiography but is mainly a defense

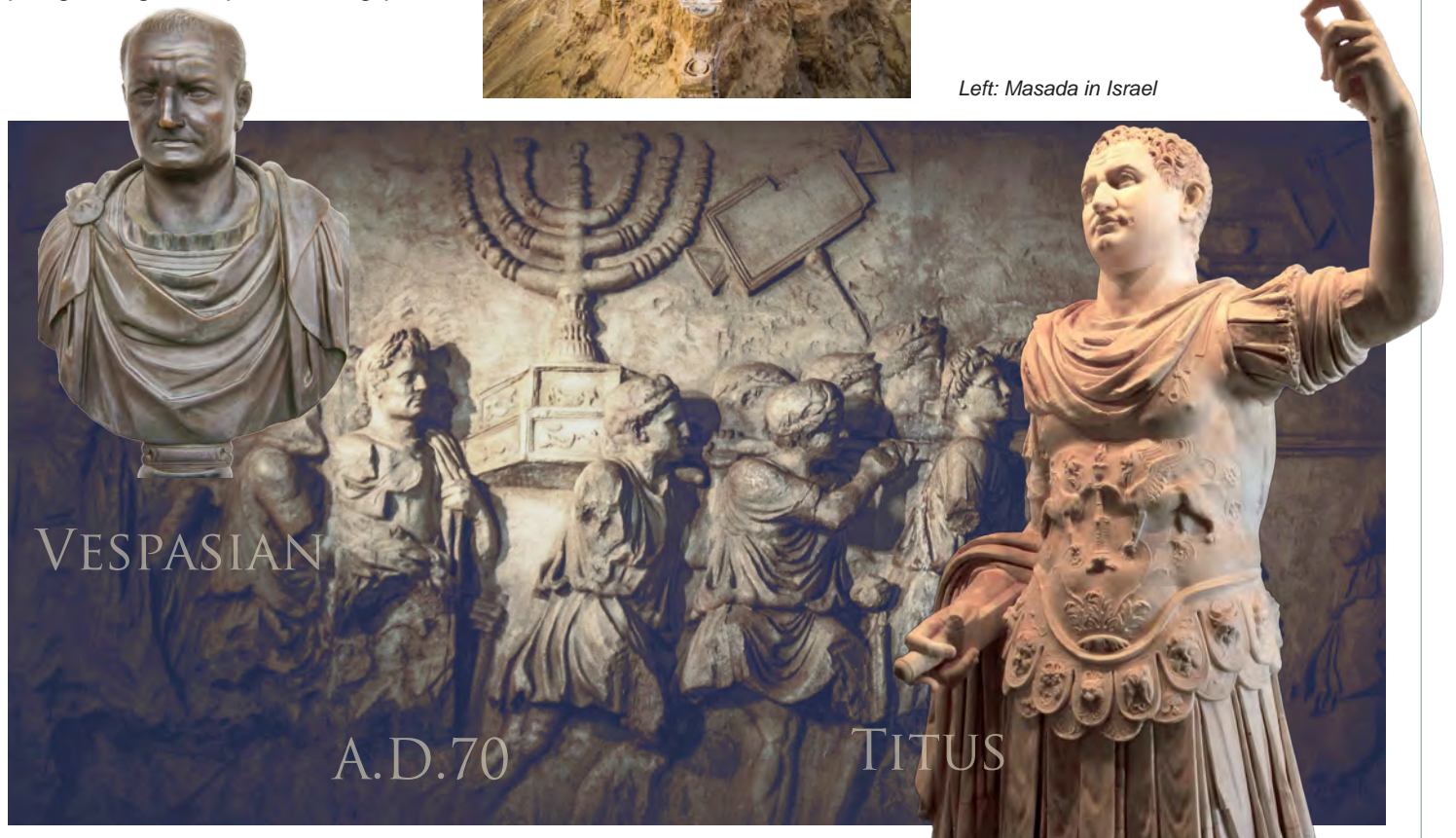
of Josephus's actions at Jotapata during the war. Josephus described his first twenty-five years in two pages and devoted the rest of the space to his conduct during the early months of the rebellion against Rome. For an understanding of first-century Israel, *The Life* is the least valuable of Josephus's writings.

Against Apion: Apion was an anti-Semitic Gentile who launched a slanderous attack against the Jews before Emperor Caligula. In this book, Josephus brilliantly defended his people and their Scriptures by answering the allegations in a most interesting manner.

The Jewish War: Rightly considered as Josephus's masterpiece, this is his vivid eyewitness account of the First Jewish Revolt against



Left: Masada in Israel





the Romans (A.D. 66–73). It is sometimes referred to by its Latin title *Bellum Judaicum*, or “B.J.” for short. At times published separately, this work is an invaluable primary source on Jerusalem’s topography. It also contains a moving description of the fortress Masada and the mass suicide/murder of the Jewish soldiers and their families.

The Antiquities: Josephus’s longest work ambitiously traces the history of the Jewish people from their biblical roots to the beginning of the war in A.D. 65 in twenty books. His treatment of the Old Testament accounts was sometimes straightforward, almost reproducing the biblical text word for word. However, he often added many details, and at other times he made glaring omissions. He included many folklore stories found in rabbinic *midrashim* as well as elaboration of the biblical stories. For instance, according to Genesis 12:10, Abraham went down to Egypt because of a famine, but according to *The Antiquities*, he went down to Egypt to debate with the wise men there. Such elaboration of the biblical text was not viewed as “tampering” by the Jewish ancients but as an example of concentrating on the inner experience and motivation of the characters. On the other hand, Josephus omitted many episodes that he regarded as disreputable or unflattering of the Jewish “heroes,” such as Jacob’s trickery (Gen. 27), Moses’s slaying of the Egyptian (Ex. 2:12), Miriam’s leprosy (Num. 12), and Moses’s striking of the rock (Num. 20:10-12). Furthermore, Ra-

hab’s embarrassing role as a prostitute was smoothed over by simply calling her an “innkeeper.”

When read judiciously, *The Antiquities* provides us with a fascinating account of Jewish history, including invaluable insights into such diverse characters as Alexander the Great, the Maccabees, and Herod the Great, as well as some key New Testament personalities.

Josephus and Yeshua

Many articles in our Bible dictionaries would be considerably shortened or even omitted if we did not have Josephus’s writings. With all of his faults, he remains our main historical source for the period from approximately 400 B.C. to A.D. 73. Josephus discussed most of the main historical characters in the New Testament, such as Herod the Great (Mt. 2), his son Herod Antipas (Mk. 6:14-29), his grandson Herod Agrippa (Acts 12), and his great grandson Agrippa II (Acts 26). His works include a vivid account of Pontius Pilate’s rule as well as a detailed description of the magnificent Herodian Temple in Jerusalem. As they have conducted their excavations, archaeologists have continually praised Josephus’s accurate description of first-century Jerusalem.

Josephus also provided an interesting description of the preaching of John the Baptist. He informed us that Herodias’s daughter, who danced for Herod Antipas, was named Salome and that John was imprisoned in the fortress of Machaerus on the eastern shore of the

Dead Sea, where he was also executed.

The New Testament mentions that Yeshua’s brother James was the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:3-23). Josephus described the stoning execution of James under the instigation of the high priest Ananus in A.D. 62, adding the note that even unbelieving Jews objected to this atrocity committed by the Sadducees on this godly man.

Josephus’s most celebrated and controversial passage is his brief description of Yeshua found in *The Antiquities* 18.63. The passage reads as follows:

About this time lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was the achiever of extraordinary deeds and was a teacher of those who accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When he was indicted by the principal men among us and Pilate condemned him to be crucified, those who had come to love him originally did not cease to do so; for he appeared to them on the third day restored to life, as the prophets of the Deity had foretold these and countless marvelous things about him. And the tribe of Christians, so named after him, has not disappeared to this day.

This passage has been used to argue that Josephus was a Jewish believer in Yeshua the Messiah. However, he gave no evidence of such a belief in any of the rest of his writings, particularly in his apologetic work *Against Apion*. While there



are some critics who believe that the entire passage was inserted by a later Christian editor, the language reflects a non-Christian author (e.g., calling Yeshua a “wise man” and referring to Jewish believers as a “tribe”). There is much evidence for viewing the passage as an authentic witness to Yeshua’s life, death, and resurrection. It is difficult to comprehend, however, how Josephus could write the sentence that appears to be a clear confession of faith: “He was the Messiah.” Perhaps the best approach is to assume that the passage was genuinely written by Josephus with a few slight alterations by a later Christian editor. The discovery in the 1970s and subsequent publication of a tenth-century Arabic version of the *Testimonium* lacks distinct Christian terminology while sharing the essential elements of the passage. This is evidence indicating that the Greek passage in Josephus was subject to interpolation. This approach would satisfy what appears to be both Christian and non-Christian elements in the passage. It should not be forgotten that Josephus’s writings were preserved not by Jewish scribes but by believers. The Josephus reference thus serves as a historical attestation to Yeshua’s existence and to the basic form of His teachings.

Conclusion

Josephus may not be a reliable guide when he expanded on the accounts of the Hebrew Bible or when he wrote about his own personal role in certain events. However, he is indispensable for a fuller understanding of the New Testament era. When read with care, his writings are an invaluable companion to the study of the Scriptures, especially the Gospels and Acts. Josephus’s reference to Yeshua, even in its original abbreviated form, is a strong argument against the foolish idea that Yeshua never existed.



Dr. William Varner teaches Bible exposition and Greek exegesis at The Master’s University. He has authored more than a dozen books, including his newest work *Messiah’s Ministry - Crises of the Christ* (Fontes Press, 2021).

