

**Tal Ilan and Vered Noam in collaboration with Meir Ben Shahar, Daphne Baratz, and Yael Fisch. *Josephus and the Rabbis*. 2 volumes. Between Bible and Mishnah. Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi Press, 2017. ISBN: 9789652174031. Pp. 965. \$60 USD. Hardback. [Hebrew].**

**Gavin McDowell  
Université Laval**

Tal Ilan and Vered Noam—with the collaboration of Meir Ben Shahar, Daphne Baratz, and Yael Fisch—have produced a monumental work on an intriguing and important issue, the relationship between the works of the Second Temple Jewish historian Flavius Josephus and the literature of the rabbinic sages. It is generally assumed that the rabbis rejected the Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, from the Septuagint (openly and repeatedly pilloried in rabbinic literature) to the works of Philo, Josephus, and the Qumran sect as well as the New Testament, the product of yet another Jewish sect. However, a large number of parallels between the literature of the sages and the works of Josephus have long been noted, raising the usual questions regarding dependence: 1) Do the rabbis depend on Josephus? 2) Does Josephus depend on the rabbis? or 3) Do the two depend on a common source?

In this case, the only option that deserves serious attention is the third. Despite the substantial number of parallels, the rabbis do not quote Josephus, and there is no rabbinic literature to speak of until long after the destruction of the Temple. The assumption of shared sources, oral or written, is the starting point for the work of Ilan, Noam, et al. In fact, they begin with an astounding observation: The most substantial parallels between Josephus and the rabbis can be found in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*. The parallels between the *Antiquities* and the literature of the sages take the form of anecdotes that are inessential to the main narrative and, furthermore, are missing from Josephus' earlier work, the *Jewish War*, even where the two works recount the same event. In other words, Josephus appears to have supplemented the *Antiquities* with sources that he did not use for the *War*. Some of these lost sources, in principle, could have been known to the rabbis.

The study is divided into two substantial volumes. The first volume, "The Lost Tales of the Second Temple Period," focuses on the parallels of greatest interest, including such well-known tales as Alexander the Great's encounter with the high priest in Jerusalem, the translation of the Septuagint, events from the Maccabean wars, the construction of the illicit Temple of Onias in Egypt, the rift between the Pharisees and the Hasmonean kings, and the conversion of the House of Adiabene. The parallels in this volume are the ones with the greatest claim to derive from common sources shared between Josephus and the rabbis. The second volume, "Tales about the Destruction of the Temple," focuses on parallels between the rabbis and the disastrous revolt against Rome as narrated in the *Jewish War*. These parallels are less precise than the ones found in the *Antiquities*. They do not reflect common sources but rather common themes or ideas. Despite this, the second volume features the longest chapter, the prophecy of Vespasian's accession to the throne, which also happens to be one of the best-known parallels between the two corpora. Josephus has the audacity to put this prophecy in his own mouth, while the rabbis attribute the prophecy to R. Yohanan b. Zakkai, the founder of the rabbinic community at Yavne. Another way to look at the two volumes is that Volume One examines the rabbinic parallels with the *Jewish Antiquities*, while Volume Two treats the rabbinic parallels with the *Jewish War*.

Here is a full listing of the contents of the two volumes, including appendices:

**Volume One: The Lost Tales of the Second Temple Period**

Introduction (Vered Noam)

1. The High Priest and Alexander the Great (Meir Ben Shahar)

Appendix 1: The High Priest and Alexander the Great: Did it happen? (Meir Ben Shahar)  
 Appendix 2: Josephus and the Rabbis in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period (Meir Ben Shahar)  
 2. The Septuagint (Yael Fisch)  
 3. Nicanor's Defeat (Vered Noam)  
 Appendix: Alcimus and Yaqim of Zerorot (Tal Ilan)  
 4. The Temple of Onias (Tal Ilan)  
 Appendix 1: Another Proposal for the Reconstruction of the Version in the Jerusalem Talmud (Vered Noam)  
 Appendix 2: The Murder of the Priest in the Temple (Tal Ilan)  
 5. John Hyrcanus and the Heavenly Voice (Vered Noam)  
 6. The Rift with the Pharisees (Vered Noam)  
 Appendix 1: The Language of the Story (Vered Noam)  
 Appendix 2: King Jannaeus in the Babylonian Talmud (Tal Ilan)  
 7. Alexander Jannaeus/The Priest Who Was Pelted with Citrons (Vered Noam)  
 8. Jannaeus's Deathbed Instructions (Tal Ilan)  
 9. The Fratricidal Hasmonean Conflict (Vered Noam)  
 10. A Golden Vine/Garden in the Temple (Daphne Baratz)  
 11. The Trial of Herod/Jannaeus (Tal Ilan)  
 12. Herod's Deeds (Tal Ilan)  
 Appendix: Herodian Doves (Tal Ilan)  
 13. The Miracle of the Rainfall in Herod's Day (Tal Ilan)  
 14. Joseph the Son of Ellemus (Daphne Baratz)  
 Appendix: Simeon b. Qimhith (Tal Ilan)  
 15. The Plot and Death of Herod/Jannaeus (Tal Ilan, Vered Noam)  
 Appendix: The Bene Bathyra (Tal Ilan)  
 16. A Statue in the Temple (Vered Noam)  
 Appendix: The Bones Found in the Temple (Yael Fisch)  
 17. Agrippa/Jannaeus and the Nazirites' Offerings (Vered Noam)  
 18. The Conversion of the House of Adiabene (Tal Ilan)  
 19. Eleazar the Son of Deinaeus (Tal Ilan)  
 20. The Corruption of the High Priests (Yael Fisch)  
 Appendix: High Priests and the Red Heifer (Tal Ilan)

## **Volume Two: Tales about the Destruction of the Temple**

Introduction (Tal Ilan)  
 21. The Abolishment of the Sacrifice on Behalf of the Emperor (Meir Ben Shahar)  
 22. The Bloody Events in the Opening of the First Revolt (Daphne Baratz)  
 23. The Prediction to Vespasian (Meir Ben Shahar)  
 24. Phanni of Aphthia (Daphne Baratz)  
 25. Simeon the Son of Gamaliel (Tal Ilan)  
 26. The Burning of the Stocks of Grain (Meir Ben Shahar)  
 Appendix: Nicodemus ben Gurion (Meir Ben Shahar)  
 27. The Drying Up of the Siloam Spring (Tal Ilan)  
 28. The Heroes of the War against Rome (Tal Ilan)  
 Appendix: Natira/Natrona (Tal Ilan)  
 29. The Mother Who Devoured Her Son (Tal Ilan)  
 30. Titus's War Council (Tal Ilan)  
 31. Titus in the Holy of Holies (Meir Ben Shahar)  
 Appendix: Scaling the Wall and Entering the Temple (Meir Ben Shahar)  
 32. Priestly Suicide in the Burning Temple (Meir Ben Shahar)  
 Appendix: The Temple Supervisors (Meir Ben Shahar)

33. The Opening of the Temple Gates (Tal Ilan)
34. The Census in the Days of Cestius/Agrippa (Yael Fisch)
35. The Plundering of the Temple Utensils (Tal Ilan)

The length of individual chapters varies considerably. Some chapters are as short as five pages (“The Drying Up of the Siloam Spring,” “The Miracle of Rainfall”). Others are as long as fifty or sixty pages, including the first chapter, “The High Priest and Alexander the Great” (fifty-four pages), and “The Prediction to Vespasian” (sixty-one pages). Vered Noam’s introduction is the length of a short monograph (ninety pages). The corpus of rabbinic literature examined includes the usual suspects. In addition to the Babylonian Talmud, which has the largest number of parallels with Josephus, the Mishnah, the Tosefta, the Jerusalem Talmud, and the following Midrashim are also cited: Sifra, Sifre, Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, Lamentations Rabbah, and Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana. All of these belong to the Tannaitic or Amoraic period and constitute the core of the classical rabbinic canon. Some unusual and neglected sources are also included, notably Megillat Ta’anit, a short Aramaic chronicle of Second Temple origin with medieval scholia in rabbinic Hebrew. The presence of this text is both welcomed but also a little unsurprising: it was the subject of an earlier monograph by Vered Noam. Finally, both versions of Avot de-Rabbi Nathan figure prominently.

Some chapters, especially in Volume Two, discuss post-Talmudic works such as Song of Songs Zuta, Pesiqta Rabbati, and Bereshit Rabbati. Unlike classical rabbinic sources, which do not reflect direct knowledge of Josephus, some of these later works have surprising details in common with the Hellenistic Jewish writer. One work that is infrequently discussed (although it is certainly mentioned) is Sefer Yosippon, the Hebrew rendition of *De Excidio Hierosolymitana*, a Latin reworking of the *Jewish War* of Josephus with a distinctly Christian bias (the destruction of Jerusalem is divine retribution for the crucifixion of Jesus). Sefer Yosippon did much to reintroduce Josephus to a Jewish audience. If Sefer Yosippon cannot explain the knowledge of Josephus in later works, then it at least shows growing contact between Jews and Christians, who preserved Josephus’ *oeuvre*, in the post-Talmudic period.

The chapters follow a similar structure, although this is not always clearly reflected by subheadings. Each chapter begins with the primary sources. Josephus is always quoted first, in Hebrew translation. This is followed by all of the rabbinic sources quoted in the original Hebrew and Aramaic. The first section of each chapter provides historical background, amounting to a modern-day distillation of the data from Josephus and his contemporaries. Thus, the chapter on the translation of the Septuagint refers to the Letter of Aristeas. The chapter on the defeat of the Seleucid general Nicanor during the Maccabean revolt examines the account of this event in 1-2 Maccabees. The chapter entitled “A Statue in the Temple,” about Gaius Caligula’s attempt to erect an idol of Jupiter in the Temple of Jerusalem, mentions Philo’s *On the Embassy to Gaius*. The chapter on the Temple of Onias includes a brief section on archaeology. The Greek and Roman historians Tacitus, Suetonius, Strabo, and Cassius Dio are frequently cited. One chapter, “Priestly Suicide in the Burning Temple,” has an extended discussion of 2 Baruch.

The second section of each chapter is an evaluation of Josephus. This section can occupy several pages and sometimes strays far from the topic. For example, the first chapter, “The High Priest and Alexander the Great,” one of the longest, discusses the biblical vocabulary of Josephus, the schism between Jews and Samaritans, the succession of the Jerusalem high priests in the early Second Temple period, and the historical reliability of the book of Nehemiah. The next section considers rabbinic parallels. The authors are always attentive to the chronology of the rabbinic sources as well as the literary context in which the parallel appears. Tannaitic works are presented before Amoraic works, and Palestinian sources are discussed separately from their Babylonian counterparts. This section too can be a bit meandering. The chapter on “Priestly Suicide in the Burning Temple,” for example, spends less time on this subject and more on the theme of the throwing of the Temple keys. The chapter is interested in how these two themes, attested separately in Josephus and 2 Baruch, became intertwined in rabbinic literature. The last section of each

chapter, of course, discusses the encounter between Josephus and the rabbis. As noted in the table of contents above, several chapters have appendices. A select few chapters have more than one.

The conclusions are surprisingly diverse. The authors never presume that the rabbis directly consulted the works of Josephus. The exceptional cases where dependence seems likely (e.g., “The Bloody Events in the Opening of the First Revolt,” “The Heroes of the War against Rome”) stem uniformly from post-Talmudic sources. More frequently the authors opt for oral channels of transmission. This is most often the case for stories about the destruction of the Temple, where the parallels are vague. In a few daring cases, the authors posit the existence of a lost historical source common to Josephus and the rabbis. The best example is probably the story of the rupture between the Pharisees and the Hasmonean kings. According to Josephus, this event happened in the days of John Hyrcanus, but the rabbis place the rift in the days of Hyrcanus’ son and (eventual) successor Alexander Jannaeus. The account in the Babylonian Talmud is a baraita written in biblicalizing Hebrew. From this, Vered Noam (the author of this chapter) concludes that the rabbis might have used a Second Temple source. I am inclined to agree with this position, except that I think it is far more likely that the rabbis substituted Jannaeus for Hyrcanus (the tradent of this particularly baraita, R. Abaye, overtly identifies the two in b. Ber. 29a) than that Josephus made a basic historical error.

In the end, it is hard to reach concrete solutions to the problem of Josephus and the rabbis. Oral transmission of memories of the Second Temple period, however likely that may be, is still an unfalsifiable hypothesis. The existence of a “Lost Atlantis” of Second Temple Jewish literature—again, very likely—can only be postulated instead of proven. We would need another discovery on the level of Qumran. The authors express the guarded hope that the parallel rabbinic accounts, when properly analyzed, might serve as an alternative or, at least, a supplement to Josephus in Second Temple historiography. I am not so optimistic. Josephus is tendentious, self-serving, and a damnable liar, but he is still the primary source for Second Temple Jewish history for the same reason that the Gospels remain the primary source for historical Jesus research: it’s all we’ve got. Rabbinic memories of the Second Temple period—and the authors are also aware of this—are literary artifacts rather than historical ones. If rabbinic literature were our sole source for Second Temple history, our knowledge of this period would be exceptionally poor. I am reminded of a remark about how the history of ancient Israel would look if we only possessed Islamic sources such as the *Tarikh* of Ahmad al-Ya‘qubi (9<sup>th</sup> c.):

What is the total impression which this piece of history-writing leaves? Perhaps it may be the somewhat melancholy reflection that if the bulk of Old Testament history had survived in this, and only this, form, we should know next to nothing about Ancient Israel. Al-Ya‘kubi’s virtual omission from history of the Northern Kingdom, the almost complete confusion about the exile and return, the mix-up of the two kings called “Joash,” the anachronistic introduction of Constantine, and so on—these indicate, in a striking way, how severely limited a cultured ninth-century Arab’s understanding of the past was.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Islamic accounts of the prophetic past sometimes share the same folkloric motifs found in rabbinic accounts of the Second Temple period. Persian miniatures of Alexander the Great will often show the conqueror worshipping at the Ka‘ba rather than the Jerusalem Temple. Nimrod, the quintessential tyrant in Islamic tradition, is made to suffer the same fate as the impious Roman Emperor Titus: an insect enters his ear and gnaws out his brains. In the absence of primary written sources such as Josephus (or, in the case of Islam, the Bible itself), history has become myth.

On a more positive note, the present work draws attention to what the rabbis *did* know about the Second Temple period. The rabbis are not given enough credit in this regard. They are aware of many texts and

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<sup>1</sup> R. Y. Ebied and L. R. Wickham, “Al-Ya‘kūbī’s Account of the Israelite Prophets and Kings,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 29 (1970): 80–98 (at p. 82).

traditions from the Second Temple period. The best-known example is probably the book of Ben Sira, which is cited in many rabbinic texts.<sup>2</sup> But there is much more than that. The rabbis, of course, are generally aware of the Maccabean wars, since the celebration of Hanukkah is derived from the rededication of the Temple during this period (b. Shab. 21b). The story of the mother and her seven sons, best known from 2 Maccabees 7, was repurposed by the rabbis to describe the persecution under Hadrian (Lam. Rab. 1:50).<sup>3</sup> The rabbis know the story of Bel and the Dragon (Gen. Rab. 68:13).<sup>4</sup> The rabbis know the demon Asmodeus from the book of Tobit (b. Git. 68a–b). The rabbis know the names of Jannes and Jambres—the magicians who opposed Moses (b. Menah. 85a, cf. 2 Tim 3:8)—in their Semitic forms (cf. the later Chronicles of Moses, which cites the Greco-Latin forms). The rabbis know a version of the story of Jesus (b. Sanh. 43a). The rabbis even know the names of the leaders of the Watchers from the Enochic tradition—Azael and Shemhazai—as well as the names of their giant sons (b. Yoma 67b; b. Nid. 61a). None of these are examples of “back-borrowing” from Christian sources, a frequent occurrence in European Jewish literature from the tenth century onward, as exemplified particularly by *Sefer Yosippon*. Apart from Ben Sira, none are direct citations of Second Temple texts, and so it would be difficult to affirm that the rabbis took these traditions from Christians, who preserved most extant Second Temple literature. There is, however, a living tradition of transmitting Second Temple material in rabbinic circles reminiscent of the “Lost Atlantis” described by Noam, Ilan, et al.

All in all, this is an excellent volume, a veritable encyclopedia of everything one could possibly want to know about Josephus and the rabbis. Even if one disagrees with individual conclusions (the five authors occasionally disagree with each other), there is such a wealth of information here that the work is only likely to be surpassed by its own translation. On that note, Vered Noam has already published an English monograph based on the volume, *Shifting Images of the Hasmoneans: Second Temple Legends and Their Reception in Josephus and Rabbinic Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), which includes revisions of six key chapters from Volume One: 1) Nicanor’s Defeat; 2) John Hyrcanus and a Heavenly Voice; 3) The Rupture with the Pharisees; 4) Alexander Jannaeus/The Priest Who Was Pelted with Citrons; 5) Alexander Jannaeus’s Instructions to His Wife; 6) The Fratricidal Hasmonean Conflict and the Murder of Onias. I hope that this publication will not impede a future translation of the whole work.

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<sup>2</sup> Jenny R. Labendz, “The Book of Ben Sira in Rabbinic Literature,” *AJS Review* 30 (2006): 347–392.

<sup>3</sup> The Christian story of St. Sophia and her three daughters Faith, Hope, and Charity, also martyrs under Hadrian, is similar to that of the Maccabean martyrs. Even their feast day is the same (August 1).

<sup>4</sup> This section, however, is missing from the critical edition of Theodor/Albeck.