

Historicus Practicus:* Calvin's Use of Josephus in the *Commentaries* and *Lectures

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Abstract

This article contributes specifically to the filling in of a lacuna in scholarship regarding the reception of Josephus's writings among the Reformers and contributes generally to investigations into the humanist scholarship of the Reformation. It analyzes the use of Josephus's writings in Calvin's *Commentaries* and *Lectures* in order to bring about a better understanding of both the nature of his reception of Josephus and the character of his historical enterprise. The picture that emerges is of Calvin as *historicus practicus*: i.e., his role as historian was subordinated to his responsibility as theologian to edify the church. Calvin's specific attitude towards the writings of Josephus is best explained by competing historical factors, especially Josephus's earlier positive reception by the early church and the negative attitudes toward Jews present in the sixteenth century.

The writings of the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus have long been highly valued by the church, perhaps even from the time they were first delivered piecemeal to an audience in the city of Rome.¹ In fact, his works owe their very survival to the Christian scribes who saw fit to laboriously copy them out, since the majority of the Jews of following centuries largely abandoned their native son. In terms of his influence, much work has been done on the reception of his work by the early church writers,² in particular the prominent church historian Eusebius of Caesarea.³ The significant impact of Eusebius himself on later Christian writers ensured that Josephus's writings were not forgotten, but maintained a place of importance through the medieval period and into the time of the Reformation. Josephus's impact on later eras has, however, rarely been vigorously pursued.⁴ In his monumental

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Riemer Faber and Ted Van Raalte for their assistance with an earlier draft of this paper.

¹ The gospel writer Luke has been imagined as a possible member of the audience for Josephus's writings; see Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins, Treating of the Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship, and Dates* (London: Macmillan, 1924), 558; cf. H. St. John Thackeray, *Josephus: The Man and the Historian* (New York: Jewish Institute of Religion Press, 1929), 128.

² See especially Gustave Bardy, "Le souvenir de Josèphe chez les Pères," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 43 (1948): 179–91; Heinz Schreckenberg, *Die Flavius-Josephus-Tradition in Antike und Mittelalter* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 68–171; *Rezeptionsgeschichtliche und Textkritische Untersuchungen zu Flavius Josephus* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 13–43; "The Works of Josephus and the Early Christian Church," in *Josephus, Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Louis Feldman and Göhei Hata (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 315–24; Wataru Mizugaki, "Origen and Josephus," in *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*, ed. Louis H. Feldman and Göhei Hata (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 325–37; Steven Bowman, "Josephus in Byzantium," in *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*, ed. Louis H. Feldman and Göhei Hata (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 362–85; Michael Hardwick, *Josephus as an Historical Source in Patristic Literature through Eusebius*, BJS 128 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Heinz Schreckenberg and Kurt Schubert, *Jewish Historiography and Iconography in Early and Medieval Christianity* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1992), 7–138; Tommaso Leoni, "Translations and Adaptations of Josephus' Writings in Antiquity and the Middle Ages," *Ostraka* 16 (2007): 481–92.

³ On Eusebius's use of Josephus as a source, see Schreckenberg, *Die Flavius-Josephus-Tradition*, 79–88; Hardwick, *Josephus*, 69–90, 100–102, 121–24; Schreckenberg and Schubert, *Jewish Historiography*, 63–71; Göhei Hata, "Eusebius and Josephus: The Way Eusebius Misused and Abused Josephus," in *Patristica: Proceedings of the Colloquia of the Japanese Society for Patristic Studies*, PSS 1 (n.p.: Shinseisha, 2001), 49–66; "The Abuse and Misuse of Josephus in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, Books 2 and 3," in *Studies in Josephus and the Varieties of Ancient Judaism: Louis H. Feldman Jubilee Volume*, ed. Louis H. Feldman, Shaye J. D. Cohen, and Joshua J. Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 91–102.

⁴ The question of the "use and abuse" of Josephus's writings has been addressed more broadly; see, e.g., Steve Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 7–19; Leoni, "Translations," 481–92. An exception for the sixteenth century is Betsy Halpern Amaru, "Martin Luther and Flavius Josephus," in *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*, ed. Louis H. Feldman and Göhei Hata (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 411–26.

bibliography published in 1984, the dean of Josephan studies, Louis H. Feldman, remarked regarding the sixteenth century in particular, "The subject of Josephus' influence remains to be traced."⁵ Nearly ten years later he could still pronounce that "the place of Josephus in the history of the Protestant Reformation remains to be documented."⁶ In the meantime, nearly twenty years has elapsed and much the same could still be said.⁷

This is not to say that Josephus has been ignored entirely by scholars of the Reformation. In fact, he has appeared relatively frequently in scholarly studies of the use of the church fathers by Reformers such as John Calvin,⁸ and occasionally in other contexts as well.⁹ Nevertheless, his influence remains to be traced systematically and precisely in the writings of the Reformers. The present study will contribute to the filling in of this lacuna in scholarship by focusing on Calvin's use of Josephus's writings in his *Commentaries* and *Lectures*. I will begin by analyzing a selection of citations under the following categories: a) general evaluation of Josephus; b) use of Josephus for filling out the biblical text; and c) rejection or criticism of Josephus's description or interpretation of events. Subsequently, I will evaluate the manner in which Calvin used Josephus as a source with the aim of contributing to the ongoing investigation of Calvin's attitude towards history and his historical method.¹⁰ I will argue that Calvin's purposes in using Josephus were primarily practical—i.e., he was above all a *historicus*

⁵ Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus and Modern Scholarship, 1937–1980* (New York: de Gruyter, 1984), 803.

⁶ Louis H. Feldman, *Studies in Hellenistic Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 239.

⁷ Exceptions: Amaru, "Martin Luther," 411–26; Pauline M. Smith, "The Reception and Influence of Josephus's Jewish War in the Late French Renaissance with Special Reference to the Satyre Menippée," *Renaissance Studies* 13.2 (1999): 173–91.

⁸ See, e.g., Anthony N. S. Lane, "Calvin's Use of the Fathers and the Medievals," *Calvin Theological Journal* 16.2 (1981): 149–200; *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999); Randall C. Zachman, *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian: The Shape of His Writings and Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); R. Ward Holder, *John Calvin and the Grounding of Interpretation. Calvin's First Commentaries*, SHCT (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

⁹ Riemer Faber, "Scholastic Continuities in the Reproduction of Classical Sources in the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*," *Church History and Religious Culture* 92.4 (2012): 561–79, esp. 562 (n. 5), 577.

¹⁰ R. J. Mooi, *Het kerk-en dogmahistorisch element in de werken van Johannes Calvijn* (Wageningen: Veenman, 1965); Danièle Fischer, *Jean Calvin, historien de l'Eglise: sources et aspects de la pensée historique et de l'historiographie du Réformateur* (Diss., Strasbourg, 1980); Lane, "Calvin's Use," 149–200; Irena Backus, "Calvin's Judgement of Eusebius of Caesarea: An Analysis," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 22.3 (1991): 437; James R. Payton, "Calvin and the Libri Carolini," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 28 (1997): 467–80; Lane, *John Calvin*, passim; Irena Backus, *Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation (1378–1615)*, SMRT 94 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 115–16; Zachman, *John Calvin*, 119–21; Holder, *John Calvin*, 260–68.

practicus, as Mooi put it¹¹—and that his controlling aim was the edification of the church. I will also suggest that his harsh portrayal of Josephus the man and his utilitarian approach to Josephus the historian, which seem at odds, are best explained by a complex interplay of factors, including the ecclesiastical legacy of Josephus, Calvin's interactions with the writings of the church fathers, and broader sixteenth-century attitudes towards the Jews and Jewish literature.

1. Calvin's Citations of Josephus

1. General Evaluation of Josephus

Before we consider the ways in which Calvin appealed to or interacted with the writings of Josephus, it is useful to consider three instances in which Calvin commented more generally on the value of the Jewish historian. The most extreme judgment occurs in connection with the opening verse of the book of Daniel. In his version of this account, Josephus synchronizes the events with the close of Zedekiah's reign, suggesting that Daniel's deportation should be connected with the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. rather than the third year of Jehoiakim's reign (606 B.C.), as the book of Daniel reports.¹² This is not the place to enter into an extended discussion of this divergence, but it should be noted that the precise dating has long troubled biblical commentators, as Calvin himself also observes, so Josephus's attempt to rescue the biblical narrative from what he saw as a chronological infelicity was not unusual. The judgment of Calvin comes, therefore, as somewhat of a shock:

Interpreters make many mistakes in this matter. Josephus, indeed says this was done in the eighth year, but he had never read the Book of Daniel. He was an unlearned man [*tam brutus homo*], and by no means familiar with the Scriptures; I think he had never read three verses of Daniel. It was a dreadful judgment of God for a priest to be so ignorant a man as Josephus.¹³

Apart from the fact that Josephus never mentions the eighth year, Calvin's conjecture that Josephus had not read the book of Daniel is demonstrably untrue. Josephus's account follows the biblical narrative far too closely to

¹¹ Mooi, *Het kerk-en dogmahistorisch element*. I have been unable to consult Mooi, but see Johannes van Oort, "John Calvin and the Church Fathers," in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. Irena Backus (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 2:697; *De Kerkvaders in Reformatie en Nadere Reformatie* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1997), 81.

¹² Josephus, *Ant.* 10.195; cf. 10.186.

¹³ *Calvini opera* (hereafter, *CO*) 40:534 (Dan 1:1).

suggest that he was unfamiliar with the book itself.¹⁴ Moreover, as modern scholarship has amply shown, any reader of Josephus cannot fail to be impressed by the degree to which the figure of Daniel served as a type for the Jewish historian himself.¹⁵ Far more surprising than Calvin's apparent unfamiliarity with Josephus's version of the biblical narrative, however, is his startlingly harsh condemnation of the Jewish historian. He pulls no punches. In particular, the accusation that the priest was generally ignorant of Scripture was a low blow and patently false.¹⁶

This was, moreover, not the only occasion on which Calvin directed rather harsh criticism at Josephus's level of learning. In his discussion of the etymology of the name Gilgal in the book of Joshua, Calvin follows the biblical explanation, translating it "rolling off."¹⁷ Josephus, conversely, claims that the name meant "liberty," since the people recognized that they were now free from the Egyptians and their wanderings.¹⁸ Calvin's judgment of the historian for taking liberties with the text is, again, excessive and unfair: "The interpretation of liberty, adopted by Josephus, is vain and ridiculous, and makes it apparent that he was as ignorant of the Hebrew tongue as of jurisprudence."¹⁹ Josephus was likely not, in fact, ignorant of the Hebrew language.²⁰ As for the criticism of Josephus's knowledge of jurisprudence, it is unclear exactly why Calvin mentions this here. Perhaps he is thinking of his rejection of Josephus's division of the Law into two equal tables.²¹ Whatever the case may be, Calvin's judgment of the Jewish historian is again striking in its negativity.

A far more balanced view appears in the final passage under this category. It occurs in the context of Calvin's explanation of the "seventy weeks" in

¹⁴ See Geza Vermes, "Josephus' Treatment of the Book of Daniel," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42.2 (1991): 149–66; cf. Christopher Begg and Paul Spilsbury, *Judean Antiquities 8–10*, Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), excursus at *Ant.* 10.186–281.

¹⁵ For references, see William den Hollander, *Josephus, the Emperors, and the City of Rome: From Hostage to Historian*, *AJEC* 86 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 103.

¹⁶ See Josephus, *Life* 418; cf. *J. W.* 3.352; *Ag. Ap.* 1.54; Etienne Nodet, "Josephus and the Pentateuch," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods* 28.2 (1997): 191–92; "Josephus' Attempt to Reorganize Judaism from Rome," in *Making History: Josephus and Historical Method*, ed. Zuleika Rodgers, *SJSJ* 110 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 111–12; Den Hollander, *Josephus*, 172–74.

¹⁷ *CO* 25:460 (Josh 5:9).

¹⁸ Josephus, *Ant.* 5.34; "liberty" serves as a leitmotif for Josephus throughout the *Antiquities*; see Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 148; Christopher Begg, *Judean Antiquities 5–7*, Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), n. 101 ad loc.

¹⁹ *CO* 25:460 (Josh 5:9).

²⁰ Josephus, *J. W.* 6.96; cf. den Hollander, *Josephus*, 142, 154–55, 292.

²¹ Josephus, *Ant.* 3.101; cf. 3.138; Calvin, *CO* 24:602 (Exod 20:12); *Institutes* 4.9.12.

Daniel's prophecy, which Jewish commentators in particular had interpreted in ways that excluded the possibility that the advent of Jesus Christ was here being predicted. Calvin criticizes a certain Rabbi Barbinel for his easy rejection of the evidence of Josephus, by which he appears to mean the general chronological framework provided by Josephus that Calvin himself used to confirm his particular interpretation.²² More important for our purposes, however, is his subsequent admission: "I candidly confess that I cannot place confidence in Josephus either at all times or without exception [*non semper, nec absque exceptione*]."²³ While he does not here comment on the man Josephus, we receive a much more balanced reflection on the usefulness of the Jewish historian, an assessment that fits much more closely with Calvin's general approach to Josephus's works.

2. Use of Josephus for Filling out the Biblical Text

It is immediately apparent that Calvin placed a high value on the testimony of Josephus, belying the harsh pronouncements quoted above. By far the most common form of citation was a simple reference to Josephus's writings, often to the specific book, where he had information that either supported or filled out the biblical narrative.²⁴ More substantial are those instances in which he used Josephus's writings, not altogether uncritically, to bolster the account of Scripture. For example, in the account of Gamaliel's speech to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5, the leading Pharisee specifically mentions two figures, Theudas and Judas the Galilean, in a chronological order that conflicts with Josephus's account. Calvin observes, "If we credit Josephus [*si fidus habetur Iosepho*], Gamaliel alters in this place the true course of history. ... The former history [Judas the Galilean] is recorded in the 18th book of *Antiquities*; and the other in the 20th."²⁵ Calvin reconciles the apparent discrepancy by suggesting that Gamaliel was speaking synchronically rather than diachronically, thereby upholding the corroborating nature of Josephus's accounts. Further on, Calvin uses Josephus to defend the historicity of the Egyptian man who led four thousand revolutionaries into the desert with

²² Cf. Zachman, *John Calvin*, 121–22.

²³ CO 41:168 (Dan 9:24).

²⁴ CO 23:136–37 (Gen 8:3), 325 (Gen 23:11); 31:476 (Ps 48:7), 776 (Ps 83:6–9); 36:109 (Isa 5:10); 41:234 (Dan 11:13–14); 43:3 (Amos 1:1); 44:99 (Hag 2:2–6); 45:353 (Matt 12:42), 736 (Matt 26:57), 763 (Matt 27:29); 47:48 (John 2:20), 84 (John 4:20), 136 (John 6:17); 48:266 (Acts 12:1), 275 (Acts 12:21), 354 (Acts 15:13), 518 (Acts 24:2); 52:46 (Phil 3:5).

²⁵ CO 48:114 (Acts 5:36); cf. Judas the Galilean: Josephus, *Ant.* 18.4–10, 23; J. W. 2.118; Theudas: Josephus, *Ant.* 20.97.

whom the commander Claudius Lysias confused Paul.²⁶ Calvin is answering those who would conflate this figure with the Theudas mentioned above, creating issues with one of the two texts. Although Calvin himself questions details of Josephus's description of Theudas, he points to Josephus's account of the different Egyptian revolutionary prophet as "putting the matter out of doubt [*omnem dubitationem eximit*]" since "the history was fresh in memory [*recens erat historia*]."²⁷

In his commentary on the Gamaliel episode, we can see how Calvin allowed the evidence of Josephus to affect his interpretation of the biblical narrative. He does so similarly with his explanation of Luke's description of Annas as high priest at Acts 4:5.²⁸ Since Josephus reports that the position of high priest was not taken from Caiaphas, who presided over Jesus's trial, until after Pilate was commanded to report to Rome some three years after the trial,²⁹ Calvin raises the question whether this passage in Luke needs to be dated significantly after the resurrection of Christ, which would appear to contradict the general flow of the narrative in the early chapters of Acts. It is now commonly understood that the title of high priest was not strictly applied only to those whom the Romans appointed, but that a figure such as Annas, who had ceased to be high priest *stricto sensu* in A.D. 15,³⁰ could continue to hold the title popularly and be referred to as such for purposes of prestige.³¹ Nevertheless, it is significant that Calvin esteemed Josephus's testimony enough to cause him to rethink the obvious sense of this passage.

One other way in which Calvin used Josephus should be singled out, namely, to demonstrate the fulfillment of prophecy. This could take the form of a brief reference—such as the dating of the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prediction of Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of the Egyptians³²—or a more lengthy treatment. In the latter category we can include Calvin's use of Josephus to defend the literal interpretation of Ezekiel's prediction that fathers would eat their sons and sons their fathers.³³ Some commentators, according to Calvin, had suggested that this should be understood allegorically, since they could not find external historical evidence for such an event. Calvin, however, pointed to Josephus's famous account of the "cannibal"

²⁶ Acts 21:37–38.

²⁷ CO 48:489 (Acts 21:37).

²⁸ CO 48:82 (Acts 4:5).

²⁹ See Josephus, *Ant.* 18.95, 123;

³⁰ Josephus, *Ant.* 18.26, 34.

³¹ See, e.g., Helen K. Bond, *Caiaphas: Friend of Rome and Judge of Jesus?* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 75.

³² CO 39:276 (Jer 44:29–30).

³³ CO 40:126 (Ezek 5:9–10); cf. CO 38:329 (Jer 19:9); CO 39:560 (Lam 2:20).

Mary, who cooked and ate her own son during the later siege of Jerusalem.³⁴ It is important to note here that for Calvin Josephus's account is merely corroborating evidence. The real argument is found in the biblical support of Jeremiah. Thus Scripture clearly stands far above the external historical evidence. At the same time, there is a clear place for the latter as well.

For the prophecies of Daniel, Calvin turns again to Josephus, among others, to demonstrate the accuracy of the prophet's predictions. Regarding the "forsakers of the holy covenant" who made agreements with Antiochus IV Epiphanes, Calvin writes,

Profane authors [*profanos scriptores*] inform us accurately of these occurrences, and besides this, a whole book of Maccabees gives us similar information, and places clearly before us what the angel here predicts. Everyone who wishes to read these prophecies with profit, must make himself familiar with these books, and must try to remember the whole history.³⁵

Calvin demonstrates here his philosophy of the role of history in theology more generally, but he uses Josephus specifically after this general observation. He refers to the account of the construction of Onias's temple in Egypt, including Onias's claim to be fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy of an altar in Egypt,³⁶ a detail found in a letter from Ptolemy to the Jewish leader that is cited explicitly by Josephus.³⁷ Thus Josephus's narrative serves as a prime example for Calvin of the usefulness of "profane authors" in explicating and filling out the biblical text.

Perhaps Calvin's favorite episode in Josephus's narratives for this purpose is the meeting between Alexander the Great and Jadus the high priest.³⁸ Calvin twice relates this story at length to illustrate God's gracious protection of his people, "to show that the church of God is preserved in the midst of dangers by strange and unusual methods."³⁹ The didactic value he placed on this episode is highlighted by its use in a sermon on Daniel 7:1–6 as well.⁴⁰ Unfortunately for Calvin, though he had no doubt of its truthfulness, as indeed none of his contemporaries did, the account is almost certainly

³⁴ Josephus, *J. W.* 6.201–13; cf. Zachman, *John Calvin*, 119.

³⁵ CO 41:252 (Dan 11:29–30).

³⁶ Isa 19:19.

³⁷ Josephus, *Ant.* 13.69–73.

³⁸ Josephus, *Ant.* 11.325–39.

³⁹ CO 37:131–32 (Isa 45:4); see also CO 44:283 (Zech 9:16); cf. Zachman, *John Calvin*, 119.

⁴⁰ Sermon 11, CO 41:439; see E. A. De Boer, *John Calvin on the Visions of Ezekiel: Historical and Hermeneutical Studies in John Calvin's Sermons Inédits, Especially on Ezek. 36–48*, KB 21 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 211.

entirely legendary.⁴¹ Calvin can hardly be criticized for accepting the historicity of this account, given his pre-Cartesian context, but it is important to recognize his general willingness to take Josephus's narratives at face value where they did not offer any challenge to Scripture.

3. *Rejection or Criticism of Josephus's Description or Interpretation of Events*

Calvin did not, however, read Josephus's writings entirely uncritically. He was not only comfortable with criticizing Josephus for omitting what he saw as important historical details,⁴² but also with rejecting Josephus's account outright in favor of (what he thought to be) Scripture's clear testimony. Thus Calvin rejects Josephus's addition to the narrative of Daniel that some of the youths entrusted to Ashpenaz, called in the biblical account the chief eunuch or chief of the eunuchs, were themselves castrated.⁴³ This tradition, which appears also in rabbinic literature,⁴⁴ was apparently derived from 2 Kings 20:18 and Isaiah 39:7, where the prophet prophesies to Hezekiah that, "some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away; they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon" (NIV). Calvin does not appear to be aware of this connection or the general rabbinic tradition since he focuses on reinterpreting the characterization of Ashpenaz as "chief eunuch" to mean simply "chief of the officials of the court," a more general use of the term that has support elsewhere in Scripture.⁴⁵ Moreover, he mischaracterizes Josephus's account by stating, "Josephus ignorantly [*inscite*] declares these Jewish children to have been made eunuchs,"⁴⁶ ignoring the fact that Josephus only claims that *some* had been castrated.

Other instances in which Calvin rejects Josephus's version of the biblical narrative can be adduced as well. In his *Commentary* on Exodus, Calvin

⁴¹ For discussion of this legendary account, see, e.g., Arnaldo Momigliano, "Flavius Josephus and Alexander's Visit to Jerusalem," *Athenaeum* 57 (1979): 442–48; Gerhard Dellling, "Alexander der Grosse als Bekenner des jüdischen Gottesglaubens," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 12.1 (1981): 1–51; Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Alexander the Great and Jaddus the High Priest According to Josephus," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 7 (1983): 41–68.

⁴² Regarding the well-known "Murder of the Innocents," "Josephus makes no mention of this history. ... Josephus certainly ought not to have passed over a crime so worthy of being put on record" (CO 45:99 [Matt 2:16]).

⁴³ CO 40:537 (Dan 1:3); re Josephus, *Ant.* 10.186.

⁴⁴ B. Sanh. 93b; cf. Jerome, *Explanatio in Daniele* on Dan 1:3; *Adversus Iovianum libri II* 1.25; Origen, *Homiliae in Ezechielem* 14:14; *Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei* 15:5.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Gen 37:36; 40:2, 7.

⁴⁶ CO 40:537 (Dan 1:3).

writes, “Josephus falsely conjectures [*falso existimat*] that the midwives were Egyptian women, sent out as spies; whereas Moses expressly [*diserte*] says, that they had been the assistants and attendants of the Hebrew women in their travail.”⁴⁷ Although he is fair in rejecting Josephus’s alteration of the ethnicity of the midwives, which the Hebrew text does not allow,⁴⁸ Calvin’s rendering of Josephus’s account is hardly charitable here. First of all, his use of the word “spies” to characterize Josephus’s description of these women is misleading. Josephus simply reports that the Pharaoh wanted them to observe the births closely.⁴⁹ As for his claim that these were Egyptian rather than Hebrew midwives, Josephus may have found it difficult to believe that Pharaoh would have counted on Hebrew midwives to carry out his orders, as is suggested by his gloss, “For he ordered that they should be delivered of children by these who because of kinship were not likely to transgress the wish of the king.”⁵⁰ Calvin, for his part, does not address this issue, demonstrating instead a clear readiness to reject any interpretation that is not strictly faithful to the biblical account.

On another occasion Calvin reports the apparent discrepancy between Josephus’s dating of the census under the Syrian governor P. Sulpicius Quirinius to the “thirty-seventh year after the victory at Actium” (A.D. 6),⁵¹ and the account of Jesus’s birth in Luke, which is said to have occurred in the midst of a census that took place while Quirinius was indeed governor of Syria but also during the reign of Herod the Great, long dead in A.D. 6.⁵² As Calvin points out, a birth in A.D. 6 would also complicate another time reference provided by Luke, namely that it was in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar that John the Baptist began his public ministry.⁵³ In Calvin’s view the two accounts are irreconcilable and the solution to the historical problem clear. He writes, “As the age of Christ is too well known to be called in question, it is highly probable that, in this and many other passages of Josephus’ *History*, his recollection had failed him [*memoria lapsum fuisse*].”⁵⁴ Here again, then, Calvin chooses to dismiss Josephus’s divergent

⁴⁷ CO 24:17 (Exod 1:15).

⁴⁸ Exod 1:15; *contra* Etienne Nodet, *Flavius Josèphe, Les Antiquités Juives, Vol. 1: Livres I à III* (Paris: Cerf, 1992), ad loc.

⁴⁹ Josephus, *Ant.* 2.206; see Louis H. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities 1–4*, Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), n. 583 ad loc.

⁵⁰ See Josephus, *Ant.* 2.207. The translators of the LXX may have shared this supposition, since they leave the ethnicity of the midwives unspecified in the Greek and do not follow the precision of the original.

⁵¹ Josephus, *Ant.* 18.26; cf. Acts 5:12.

⁵² Luke 2:1–2; cf. 1:5.

⁵³ CO 45:71–72 (Luke 2:1); cf. Luke 3:1.

⁵⁴ CO 45:71–72 (Luke 2:1).

account out of hand in order to maintain the straightforwardness of the biblical narrative.

A final example concerns the imprisonment of John the Baptist, covered in both the Synoptic Gospels and Josephus.⁵⁵ While Josephus names Herodias's previous husband Herod, the Gospels of Matthew and Mark call him Philip. This sharp discrepancy must have seemed to Calvin to be insurmountable, since he writes, "As [Josephus's] recollection appears to have failed him [*memoria lapsus deprehenditur*] in this matter, and as he mentions also Philip's death out of its proper place, the truth of the history will be obtained with greater certainty [*certior historiae veritas*] from the Evangelists, and we must abide by their testimony."⁵⁶ A better example of Calvin's approach cannot be offered than this.

II. *Evaluation: Calvin, Josephus, and History*

Evaluating Calvin's attitude towards history on the basis of the foregoing examination of his citations of Josephus is a relatively simple affair, largely because his use of Josephus fits squarely within his general approach to history. For Calvin history was, above all else, useful. Its usefulness was, however, directly contingent on the extent to which it deepened the knowledge of Scripture. Thus, the characterization of Calvin as *historicus practicus* rings true also for the Reformer's approach to the writings of Josephus. Inasmuch as these works allowed him to unlock meaning in the text or confirm its contents, they were highly esteemed. Whenever and wherever he felt they detracted from the message of Scripture, however, they were readily rejected. The goal was the edification of the church. Thus Holder's observation serves equally well here: "John Calvin used history for his own purposes. His mind was far removed from the Rankean ideal and belonged to the sixteenth-century world of thought. For Calvin, the reading of history belonged to the sphere of theology."⁵⁷ There is a clear parallel, then, between Calvin's use of Josephus and his use of the *testimonia patrum* in that both are subordinated as authorities to Scripture itself, in keeping with the Reformers' principle of *sola Scriptura*.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Matt 14:3–12; Mark 6:17–29; Luke 3:19; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.109–19, 136–37.

⁵⁶ CO 45:137 (Luke 3:19).

⁵⁷ Holder, *John Calvin*, 263. See also, Fischer, *Jean Calvin*, 386; Payton, "Calvin," 467; van Oort, "John Calvin," 697; *De kerkvaders*, 81; Backus, *Historical Method*, 2; Zachman, *John Calvin*, 119, 121.

⁵⁸ On Calvin and the church fathers more generally, see Lane, "Calvin's Use," 149–205; van Oort, "John Calvin," 661–700; Lane, *John Calvin*; Jean-François Gilmont, *John Calvin and the Printed Book*, trans. Karin Maag (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2005), 156–78.

As with the church fathers, then, Calvin's use of Josephus is also highly selective and practical. He was interested in Josephus's works not so much for their own sake, but for what they could offer the interpreter of Scripture. Consequently, he may have been content to rely at least in part on intermediaries for his citations of Josephus. In the case of the church fathers, handbooks of quotations such as the *Decretum Gratiani* or Peter Lombard's *Libri IV sententiarum* were very useful, particularly early on in Calvin's writing career.⁵⁹ As for the writings of Josephus, we can imagine that Calvin received some of his citations filtered through the writings of others, either early or contemporary, such as Jerome, Luther, Erasmus, and Bucer, and even opponents such as Pighius and Westphal.⁶⁰ We cannot necessarily assume from his citations that Calvin had read Josephus's writings in their entirety.⁶¹

At the same time, we should not discredit the possibility that he did read all of Josephus's corpus. Among the records of the catalogue of books in the public library in Geneva of 1572, eight years after Calvin's death and thirteen years after the foundation of the Genevan Academy, are a Greek and a Latin copy of at least a portion of Josephus's works.⁶² Much of Calvin's impressive personal collection went to this library after his death.⁶³ It is impossible to say whether these editions of Josephus's works originated in Calvin's library, since the Greek copy is now lost, and the now fragmentary Latin edition, published by Erasmus and Sigismond Gelenius, has nothing to indicate ownership.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, what can be said is that copies of Josephus's writings were readily available in Geneva during Calvin's day, as another Greek copy that remains today in the Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire of Geneva also attests.⁶⁵ Moreover, the period from 1450 to 1700 more generally saw a virtual explosion of editions and translations of Josephus, surpassing those of Herodotus, Thucydides, Plutarch, or any

⁵⁹ Lane, *John Calvin*, 47–49; John L. Thompson, "Calvin as Biblical Interpreter," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 65; Gilmont, *John Calvin*, 160, 166.

⁶⁰ Thompson, "Calvin," 65; Esther Chung-Kim, *Inventing Authority: The Use of the Church Fathers in Reformation Debates over the Eucharist* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 6.

⁶¹ See Lane, *John Calvin*, 1–13. This would explain the incorrect citations or mistaken readings that are present in the commentaries, which space does not permit me to include in the present study; see, e.g., CO 24:319 (Lev 13:2); 45:526 (Luke 9:52), 648 (Matt 24:1); 48:264 (Acts 11:28); 49:40 (Rom 2:17).

⁶² See Alexandre Ganoczy, *La bibliothèque de l'Académie de Calvin* (Geneva: Droz, 1969), 167, no. 25; 179, no. 60; cf. de Boer, *John Calvin*, 212, n. 49.

⁶³ Gilmont, *John Calvin*, 135–53.

⁶⁴ Ganoczy, *La bibliothèque*, 179.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

other Greek historian.⁶⁶ Printings of these editions and translations were in even greater numbers and demonstrate clearly Josephus's popularity during this time period. It would not be surprising, therefore, if Calvin also had first-hand access to Josephus's writings. He himself assumed that they were available to his readers, since he suggests that they read further on their own on at least a couple of occasions.⁶⁷ We should likely imagine, therefore, that Calvin's exposure to Josephus was at least in part direct. That is not to say, however, that he had a copy of the *Antiquities* on his desk as he was writing his *Commentaries*. The mistaken citations would suggest that, as with the church fathers,⁶⁸ Calvin was content to rely on his prodigious memory. The interpretation of the text and the edification of his readers were his main goals, not the accuracy of his citations. He was, after all, a *historicus practicus*.

But this does not yet provide the whole picture. We have not yet reconciled the tension between the harsh characterizations of Josephus himself and the generally high value that was placed on his writings. I would argue that the explanation can be found in a number of competing historical lines. First of all, the high regard for Josephus, apart from the inherent usefulness of his narratives, can be explained by the legacy of the Jewish historian. Largely abandoned by his compatriots, Josephus was quickly adopted by the church and was highly esteemed by the early writers.⁶⁹ Most importantly, however, he was elevated to a quasi-Christian status that afforded him room among the church fathers. Jerome included a chapter on Josephus in his catalogue of Christian literature,⁷⁰ while the influential Cassiodorus included Josephus among the church writers Eusebius, Rufinus, Socrates, Sozomen, and Theodoret.⁷¹ As Schreckenberg put it, he possessed the *ecclesiastica gravitas* of a church father.⁷²

The pinnacle of his acceptance in Christian circles must be the Syrian translation of his *Jewish War* in the fourth and fifth centuries, of which the sixth book was incorporated largely into the Syrian Vulgate (*Peshitta*) as the

⁶⁶ Peter Burke, "A Survey of the Popularity of Ancient Historians, 1450–1700," *History and Theory* 5.2 (1966): 135–52 (esp. 138, Table 3); cf. Feldman, *Studies*, 239; Leoni, "Translations," 481–92.

⁶⁷ CO 45:652 (Matt 24:8); CO 48:177 (Acts 8:5).

⁶⁸ Thompson, "Calvin," 65.

⁶⁹ See, e.g., Jerome, *Epistulae* 22.35.

⁷⁰ Jerome, *De Viris illustribus* 13; see Schreckenberg and Schubert, *Jewish Historiography*, 77, "he has become, as it were, a Christian author."

⁷¹ Cassiodorus, *Institutes* 1.17.1; cf. Eva M. Sanford, "Propaganda and Censorship in the Transmission of Josephus," *Transaction and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 66 (1935): 131; Schreckenberg and Schubert, *Jewish Historiography*, 77.

⁷² Schreckenberg and Schubert, *Jewish Historiography*, 77.

“fifth book of the Maccabees.”⁷³ Thus Harnack observes, “Here Josephus has truly become part of the canon.”⁷⁴ This was exceptional. More typical are the illustrations in manuscripts of Josephus’s works from the eleventh and twelfth centuries that depict the Jewish historian in a uniquely Christian manner.⁷⁵ One, in a Latin manuscript of the *Antiquities* from the Stavelot abbey, has Josephus pictured in precisely the same manner as the Church Father Jerome, similar to the Old Testament prophets, evangelists, or other church fathers. The other shows Josephus standing before a seated Christian scribe/monk holding open the *Antiquities* to the beginning of the famous *Testimonium Flavianum*,⁷⁶ cast in the form of the biblical prophets, who in medieval illustrated Bibles are frequently depicted presenting the Christ prophecy in their own writings.

It is not surprising, then, that during the sixteenth century we also find Josephus firmly ensconced among the church fathers. In his *Ratio formandorum studiorum*, Stephan Praetorius (1536–1603), a theologian and pastor, advised young men interested in studying theology to read the church fathers, beginning, in Greek, with the ecclesiastical histories of Josephus, Eusebius, Theodoret, and Nicephorus Callixtus, followed by the other fathers roughly according to date of composition.⁷⁷ We can fully understand, therefore, that Josephus should serve as an authority alongside these church fathers also in the writings of Calvin, for whom direct citations indicated a measure of respect. Scholastic and contemporary authors were not generally afforded that dignity, nor were all those anonymous writers included under such umbrella terms as “the Jews” or “the ancients.”⁷⁸ Josephus was special, much in the way that the church fathers were.

Whence then Calvin’s more critical, and even opprobrious, use of Josephus? This can best be explained by two significant elements of Calvin’s contemporary situation. The first of these relates to sixteenth-century humanist scholarship, in particular the work of Sebastian Castellio.⁷⁹ Castellio valued

⁷³ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁴ Adolf Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur bis Eusebius* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1893), 1.859.

⁷⁵ See Schreckenberg and Schubert, *Jewish Historiography*, 90 and Plate 2, 3.

⁷⁶ Josephus, *Ant.* 18.63–64.

⁷⁷ Stephan Praetorius, *Ratio formandorum studiorum*, 30–31; cf. Backus, *Historical Method*, 272–73.

⁷⁸ Thompson, “Calvin,” 65; see also Lane, “Calvin’s Use,” 159–65; *John Calvin*, 28–32; Gilmont, *John Calvin*, 157.

⁷⁹ See Irena Backus, “Moses, Plato and Flavius Josephus. Castellio’s Conceptions of Sacred and Profane in his Latin Versions of the Bible,” in *Shaping the Bible in the Reformation: Books, Scholars, and their Readers in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Matthew McLean (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 143–66; cf. Bernard Cottrett, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 127–32.

the writings of Josephus highly. His first publication was a bilingual (Greek-Latin) collection of excerpts of Josephus's writings for young scholars to teach them not only the languages but also piety. He also made excellent use of Josephus as an aid and guide for biblical chronology. This much was unobjectionable. Where he raised the ire of certain Genevan circles, however, was in producing a Latin Bible that included extracts from Josephus to create chronological continuity, particularly for the period between the testaments.⁸⁰ While he clearly separated the Josephan excerpts from Scripture by printing the former in smaller characters without commentary and in a stilted translation, the fact was that his cavalier approach to the letter of Scripture did serious damage to the concept of canonicity, the Reformers' principle of *sola Scriptura*, and the long-standing tradition of the early church.⁸¹ He was not, moreover, the first to attempt this.⁸² Although Calvin's objections to Castellio cannot be tied directly to this specific abuse of Scripture,⁸³ it may have played a role in his conflict with the humanist scholar. One can well imagine that such misuse of Josephus's works would have left a bad taste in Calvin's mouth, so that he himself took pains to prevent his readers from receiving the wrong impression of the relative significance of the Jewish historian.

This certainly would explain Calvin's caution in citing Josephus and his readiness to explicitly reject his interpretation of the biblical narrative. It does not, however, fully account for the level of aversion towards Josephus that Calvin displays on the two occasions quoted above. This might best be explained by the widespread anti-Semitism of that period. For, as much as he may have been adopted into the ranks of the church fathers, Josephus remained a Jew. Calvin was not, therefore, entirely free from the anti-Semitism of the period. While it is not possible here to consider the degree to which Calvin himself was complicit in this anti-Semitism, a debated point,⁸⁴

⁸⁰ *La Bible nouvellement traduite, avec la suite de l'histoire depuis le temps d'Esdras jusqu'aux Maccabées: et depuis les Maccabées jusqu'à Christ* (Basel: Jean Hervage, 1555).

⁸¹ Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 231; Backus, *Historical Method*, 119, 128; "Moses," 164.

⁸² Backus, "Moses," 158–59.

⁸³ A copy of the *Biblia Castilionis* is listed on the 1572 catalogue of the Geneva Academy Library; see Ganoczy, *La Bibliothèque*, 174, no. 43; cf. Gilmont, *John Calvin*, 141.

⁸⁴ See, e.g., on the more sympathetic side, Horst Krüger, *Erben des Evangeliums: Calvin und die Juden* (Kampen: Kok, 1985); Calvin Augustus Pater, "Calvin, the Jews, and the Judaic Legacy," in *In Honor of John Calvin: Papers from the 1986 International Calvin Symposium*, ed. E. J. Furcha (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1987), 256–96; Jack Hughes Robinson, *John Calvin and the Jews* (New York: Lang, 1992); on the more critical side: Jacques Courvoisier, "Calvin und die Judentum: Zu einem Streitgespräch," in *Christen und Juden: Ihr Gegenüber vom Apostelkonzil bis heute*, ed. Wolf Dieter and Karl Thieme (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1961),

it will be helpful to provide two examples of Calvin's own comments regarding the Jews that provide a clear background for his characterization of Josephus.⁸⁵ Calvin writes, "The Jews are not only very ignorant of everything, but are also very stupid—then they have no sense of shame, and are endued with a perverse audacity ... they neglect all history, and mingle and confound things perfectly clear and completely distinct."⁸⁶ And elsewhere, "God has so blinded the whole people that they were like impudent dogs. I have had much conversation with many Jews: I have never seen either a drop of piety or a grain of truth or ingenuousness—no, I have never found common sense in any Jew."⁸⁷

While we cannot and should not downplay the distastefulness of these outbursts, it is important to recognize that Calvin's judgment arises within the context of his defense of a Christian interpretation of biblical prophecy. For Calvin, as we have seen, the truth of Scripture is paramount and must be upheld at all costs. It is at these defensive moments that his passion gets the best of him and he resorts to the anti-Semitic rhetoric of his age. We should not be entirely surprised, then, that Josephus, who could be seen to make equally objectionable interpretations of Scripture, should be the object of such vitriol. Thus, also in the estimations of Calvin, Josephus failed to escape the polarizing sentiments he has always seemed to inspire.

Concluding Thoughts

Even with these negative pronouncements against Josephus, the overwhelming impression that this study of Calvin's use of Josephus leaves is that the theologian placed a high value on the testimony of the historian, an assessment inherited from the early church. What made Calvin's reception of this legacy doubly significant was Calvin's own profound influence on the children of the Reformation. His vision was that all Christians were to be students of Scripture, daily committed to plumbing its depths.⁸⁸ For him, a

141–46; Anne Jippe Visser, *Calvijn en de Joden* ('s Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1963); Salo W. Baron, "John Calvin and the Jews," in *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict: From Late Antiquity to the Reformation*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 380–400. For a balanced approach, see Achim Detmers, "Calvin, the Jews, and Judaism," in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, ed. Dean Phillip Bell and Stephen G. Burnett (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 197–217; David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 207–34.

⁸⁵ See Zachman, *John Calvin*, 119–21.

⁸⁶ CO 41:217–18 (Dan 11:2).

⁸⁷ CO 40:605 (Dan 2:44–45).

⁸⁸ See, e.g., Sermon 25, CO 51:55 (Eph 4:11–12).

thorough knowledge of history could only enhance that understanding and, thus, the inheritance was passed on. One scholar has even suggested that Josephus was placed on a list of acceptable Sunday readings in Calvin's Geneva.⁸⁹ If this was the case, it was a tradition that continued for some time. For among the Puritans the writings of Josephus also held a special place of honor, often occupying a special place on the shelf alongside the Bible and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.⁹⁰ Apparently their Sabbath regulations also made Josephus an exception to the ban on reading anything but the Bible.⁹¹ Moreover, when they made the trek to the New World, the book most likely to be tucked away among their worldly possessions was Whiston's translation of Josephus.⁹² And so the legacies of Calvin and Josephus continued to intertwine.

⁸⁹ Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *The Jews: History, Memory, and the Present*, trans. David Ames Curtis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 53.

⁹⁰ Norman Bentwich, *Josephus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1914), 141.

⁹¹ Sanford, "Propaganda," 145; Louis H. Feldman, "Editor's Preface," in *Josephus, Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Louis H. Feldman (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 14; cf. *Josephus and Modern Scholarship*, 802, 973; Mireille Hadas-Lebel, *Flavius Josephus: Eyewitness to Rome's First-Century Conquest of Judea* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 229.

⁹² Ben Zion Wacholder, "Josephus, Flavius," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael David Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 384.