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Erotic Intentions in Josephus' *Antiquitates Judaicae*

In the *Antiquitates Judaicae* (*AJ*), Josephus retells several erotic episodes from the Bible including the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar's wife (*AJ* 2.39-59) and King David's adultery with Bathsheba (*AJ* 7.130-158). In recasting these narratives, he both amplifies and invents erotic detail, introducing sophisticated lexical and thematic innovations to the relatively simple Septuagint originals. Few of these texts have been analyzed in detail and the question of the motivation(s) behind the heightened eroticism has largely been ignored. This paper will examine the erotic vignettes, focusing on the attempted seduction of Joseph specifically. In accounting for Josephus' emphasis on the erotic, I will argue that the purpose for the prominence of passion and transgressive lust in these narratives lies in the issue of *audiences'* appeal, and that his audiences are directly related to the performative contexts for his work.

Josephus' erotic episodes are conspicuous within a Biblical narrative devoted to political, military, and religious affairs, not sexual scandals. Yet Josephan scholars have largely neglected these passages. Studies treating these narratives fail to explain adequately the motivation behind the exaggerated, even fabricated erotic detail (Feldman 1992, 1998:516-520; Attridge 1976:122-140), while interest in refining *AJ*'s audiences beyond "Greek-speaking Gentiles and Jews" (*AJ* 1.5, 4.197) does not extend to the erotic vignettes (Mason 1998). In his study of the attempted seduction of Joseph, Feldman (1992:522) proposes that Josephus inserted "especially romantic narratives" to maintain his readers' interest, without suggesting who they might be. Although no one has considered the social context for the performance of these vignettes, this avenue helps to explain their presence in Josephus' account.

Because of their content and length, these vignettes could easily have been dinnertime performance pieces presented by individual readers, as was common practice in the imperial period. Literary entertainment was an essential feature of most dinners (Plin. *Ep.* 3.1.9, 9.36.4; Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 7.8). Marvelous stories and readings of Sappho or Anacreon were in favor, but dramatic pieces that conveyed moral lessons, such as Menander's plays, were deemed the best (Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 7.8.3-4). *AJ*'s erotic accounts share similarities with much of the party fare cited and approved of by ancient authorities. Moreover, since they were self-contained narratives, detachable from the rest of *AJ*, they fit well into an established sympotic tradition of performing excerpted plays as well as Platonic dialogues (Plut. *Quaest. conv.* 7.8.1). On this basis, I argue that Josephus envisioned his tales of illicit passion as entertainment for convivial audiences. These audiences may not have sought out *AJ*. Instead, they could have been exposed to the erotic episodes as dinner guests - at Josephus' *convivia* in Rome where he wrote and published *AJ*, but also at the parties of his patrons, *amici*, and others who owned a copy of *AJ* in its entirety or just its performance scripts. If guests were both entertained and morally fortified by these accounts, carefully crafted to tread middle ground between polytheistic paganism and monotheistic Judaism, then through the vehicle of the erotic vignette, Josephus had achieved no small transcultural triumph.

Select Bibliography: H. W. Attridge, *The Interpretation of Biblical History in the Antiquitates Judaicae of Flavius Josephus* (Missoula, MT, 1976). L. H. Feldman, "Josephus' Portrait of Joseph," *Revue Biblique* 99 (1992): 379-417, 504-528; -- *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (Leiden, 1998). S. Mason, "Should Any Wish to Enquire Further (*Ant.* 1.25): The Aim and Audience of Josephus' *Judean Antiquities/Life*," in S. Mason (ed.) *Understanding Josephus: Seven Perspectives*, 64-103 (Sheffield, 1998).