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# Rewritten Bible

### Introducing the genre of rewritten Bible

Some early Jewish writings interpret the books which now make up the Bible by retelling parts of them, rather than commenting on them in the verse-plus-explanation format familiar from rabbinic sources and modern critical commentaries. Such rewriting of the Scriptures is, however, essentially the same kind of enterprise as formal commentary, as both seek to answer questions raised by the texts and to relate them to the issues of a new generation. It is also a very early form of exegesis, one which is found within the Bible itself: 1 and 2 Chronicles, for example, thoroughly rewrite and reinterpret the books of Samuel and Kings, traditions found in Exodus and Numbers are refashioned in Deuteronomy, and there are examples of the reuse and updating of older material throughout the prophetic books.<sup>1</sup>

The term 'rewritten Bible' as a description of this genre was coined in 1961 by the renowned scholar of early Judaism and Christianity, Geza Vermes, who defined it as 'a narrative that follows scripture but includes a substantial amount of supplements and interpretative developments'.<sup>2</sup> So, in these texts, sections of the biblical narrative are literally rewritten, mostly in the author's own words, but with some direct quotation and many echoes of scriptural language. The interpreter can, however, omit some episodes, drastically summarize others and include additions which offer a particular explanation of the underlying narrative. This extra material often serves to resolve apparent contradictions in the Bible, or to fill in gaps in the story, such as the names of minor figures or the inner motivation for a character's actions.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Fishbane has written extensively about this practice, called 'inner-biblical exegesis'; see e.g. his *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. 1985, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>2</sup> G. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*. 1961, Leiden: Brill, p. 95.

In the decades since Vermes' initial discussion of this genre, other scholars have defined its characteristics more fully. In an important study, for instance, Philip Alexander has concluded that rewritten Bible texts are always narratives, following a sequential, chronological order, and covering a substantial part of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> So, a work about one particular biblical figure which relates only minimally to the biblical narrative like *Joseph and Aseneth* would not be categorized as rewritten Bible by Alexander. The debate about the extent and the boundaries of this genre looks set to continue, focusing especially on whether it can also include rewritings of the legal sections of the Pentateuch, like the Qumran *Temple Scroll* (11QT).<sup>4</sup>

The best term to describe these texts is also a subject of debate, with the title 'rewritten Scripture' now generally preferred to 'rewritten Bible', since it avoids giving the misleading impression that a fixed 'Bible' with authoritative, canonical status had been agreed before these writings were composed. A further interesting question is why this form of biblical interpretation appears to have died out after the first century CE. One possibility is that with the establishment of the canon of Scripture and the stabilization of the biblical text at about this time, there was less scope for new presentations of its narrative. Certainly the structured verse-plus-comment format became the dominant form of interpretation in both rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity from this point on. In any case, the extant examples of this important genre illustrate the centrality for all Jews throughout the Second Temple period of the writings which would attain the status of Scripture: the underlying narrative of the Pentateuch in particular is presupposed in these rewritings of it; it is explicitly acknowledged in places (e.g. *L.A.B.* 43.4; 56.7; 63.5; *Jub.* 6.22); and there is a perceived need to root all theological ideas in its authority. Both the interpreters' exegetical creativity and their faithfulness to the traditions they have received, some of which seem to be very ancient, is apparent in these texts.

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<sup>3</sup> P. S. Alexander, 'Retelling the Old Testament'. In *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture: Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars*. Ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson. 1988, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 99–118.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. M. J. Bernstein, "'Rewritten Bible': A Generic Category Which Has Outlived Its Usefulness?" *Textus* 22 (2005), pp. 169–96.

## The Book of Jubilees

### Introduction to *Jubilees*

The *Book of Jubilees* retells the narrative of the book of Genesis and the early chapters of the book of Exodus, following the structure and wording of the biblical source very closely. It was composed in the middle of the second century BCE, somewhere between 160 and 130 BCE. This was a period of considerable political and religious turbulence in Palestine, when the Maccabees led a Jewish rebellion against the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes. One of the leading scholars of *Jubilees*, James Vanderkam, has argued that the book may reflect a struggle between two groups of Jews which is hinted at in other writings dating from this time (e.g. 1 Macc. 1.11). It seems that there were some Jews who advocated a more accepting attitude towards Hellenization and desired to create better relations between Israel and other nations, even if this involved a relaxation of some of the more distinctive Jewish laws. On the other hand, there were those like the author of *Jubilees* who strongly opposed any such accommodation and stressed instead God's special covenant with Israel and the need to maintain a clear separation from gentile practices.<sup>5</sup> These differences of view led ultimately to the formation of parties within Judaism, such as the Essenes and the Pharisees.

Originally written in Hebrew, the book was translated into Greek, from Greek into Latin and also into the ancient Ethiopic language Ge'ez. The original Hebrew text was lost, but some quotations from *Jubilees* in Greek and Latin are found in the writings of the church fathers, evidence of its continuing popularity and influence. Fortunately the Ge'ez version survived in a more or less complete form, because it was transmitted throughout the centuries as part of the canon of Scripture in the Ethiopian Church. The discoveries at Qumran have since thrown further light on *Jubilees*, as 15 fragmentary copies of the book in Hebrew were found there. These manuscripts are important new evidence, showing first that the Ethiopic version was a generally faithful translation of the original Hebrew, and second that it was held in high regard by the Qumran

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<sup>5</sup> J. C. Vanderkam, *The Book of Jubilees*. 2001, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 139–41.

community. Indeed, there are notable parallels between *Jubilees* and some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, in the interpretation of various laws, for example, and in the adherence to a 364-day solar calendar rather than a lunar system for dating festivals.

Nothing definite is known about the author of *Jubilees*, but he is usually assumed to have lived in Palestine. He may also have come from a priestly family, given the priority he attaches to Levi (30.18; see also 45.15) and the attention he pays to ritual matters such as the celebration of festivals and the laws about sacrifices. Other Jewish writings of this period share similar traditions, enhancing Levi's role and significance, such as the *Aramaic Levi Document*, which may have been a source for *Jubilees*, or have emerged from the same kind of priestly circles.

The *Book of Jubilees* takes the form of an extended revelation to Moses by an angel, and includes a detailed account of Israel's history, of the covenant between God and Israel, and of important laws and their interpretation. It also foretells that the people will fail to keep all the demands of the covenant so will be punished and exiled, but will eventually be shown mercy by God and restored to their own land (see e.g. 1.7–18). This setting for the narrative gives it a great deal of authority, claiming for it a status equal to that of Scripture, since it is God who commands that its message be communicated to the great teacher Moses through a high-ranking angel (1.26–7). Its words therefore demand attentive obedience, especially as they were first inscribed on heavenly tablets (1.29). Most commentators agree, however, that the author did not regard his work as a replacement for the Scriptures, but rather as a supplement to or explanation of them, since he specifically refers his audience to what is written in the book of the first law (6.22; cf. 2.24; 30.12), presumably the Torah. It is possible that he understood his additional material to have formed part of God's revelation to Moses during the 40 days and nights he was said to have spent in God's presence on Mount Sinai (Exod. 24.18).

### Key features of *Jubilees*

The underlying biblical narratives can be treated in a variety of ways in works of rewritten Bible. There is always a mixture of

straightforward retelling, rewriting with minor or more substantial changes, summarizing, interpretative additions and omissions. So, almost all of the contents of Genesis 1 to Exodus 12 are reproduced in *Jubilees*, in the same sequential order, but some episodes are abbreviated (e.g. the Joseph stories, see especially 39.1–4; the account of the sending of the plagues on Egypt, 48.5–8), while others are expanded with extrabiblical traditions and the author's own interpretation (e.g. the creation account, chapters 2–3; Noah and the flood, 5.20–7.6; Abraham's youth, especially his early abhorrence of idolatry, 11.14–12.21).

The rewritten Bible genre also allows for the smoothing out of any inconsistencies or perceived difficulties in the original narrative. This feature is noticeable in *Jubilees*, in that, for instance, it is not said that Abraham pretended that his wife was his sister to secure his safety in Egypt (Gen. 12.10–20; cf. 20.2–7) but simply that Sarah was taken from him (13.13). In similar fashion, the text emphasizes Judah's repentance for having sexual relations with Tamar (41.23–4), and justifies Rebecca's favouritism for Jacob, on the basis of Esau's fierceness from birth (19.14) and ongoing disloyalty to his parents (25.1; cf. 29.16–20; 35.13–14). Connections can also be made between different passages of Scripture. In *Jubilees*, for example, a parallel is drawn between the drowning of the pursuing Egyptians at the time of the exodus and their killing all the baby Hebrew boys by throwing them into the river (48.14; cf. *L.A.B.* 9.10; *Wisd.* 18.5). This tendency to link apparently unrelated texts is even more pronounced in the *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo, discussed below, and is found in many forms of early Jewish interpretation, testifying to the way in which these exegetes were steeped in the knowledge of Scripture, and read it as an interconnected and coherent whole, paying attention to its every word.

Biblical interpretation often aims to bring a scriptural text up to date and relate it to the issues facing a contemporary audience. This goal, called actualization, is clearly in evidence in *Jubilees*, providing some clues to its historical setting. The account of Jacob's wars against the Amorites and Edomites (chapters 34 and 37–38), for example, may have been influenced by some of the battles in the recent past under the Maccabees, as a similar list of the allies of Israel's enemies is given in the report of the war between Judas Maccabeus and the

Idumaeans or Edomites in 1 Maccabees 5. The Edomites, regarded as the descendants of Esau, are presented in a more negative light in *Jubilees* than in Genesis, and these chapters seem to be an attempt to justify the hostile relations between Israel and Edom/Idumaea in the later period. *Jubilees* shows some interest in the emotions of scriptural characters, although this feature is not as pronounced as in the later writings of Josephus, who reflects the influence of contemporary Graeco-Roman literature in this regard. The author considers, for instance, how Abraham would have felt when he parted from Lot, given that he had no sons of his own (13.18). A further literary characteristic of rewritten Bible is the creation of speeches, through which the interpreter can explain the meaning of the narrative or give voice to some of his key theological ideas. Such insertions are found throughout *Jubilees*, often taking the form of prayers (e.g. by Noah at 10.3 and Abraham at 12.19–21), blessings (e.g. Terah on Abraham, 12.29; Abraham on Jacob, 19.26–9 and 22.11–23; Rebecca on Jacob, 25.15–23) or ‘testaments’ spoken by a patriarch as he is about to die (e.g. Noah, 7.20–39; Abraham, 20.1–10; 21.1–26; Isaac, 36.1–16). The author uses these speeches to stress the importance of faithfulness to the covenant and the Jewish law, and to urge the avoidance of idolatry and intermarriage with gentiles.

In these sections there is overlap with the testament genre (see below, Chapter 5), and rewritten Bible texts also have features in common with apocalyptic works (see below, Chapter 6). *Jubilees* is, for instance, pseudonymous, presents itself as a revelation mediated by an angel and, like many apocalypses, regards history as being divided up into distinct periods. It is not, however, characterized by extensive eschatological speculation, containing only one prediction of future apostasy, disasters and judgement (23.11–31). The apocalyptic writing with which *Jubilees* appears to have the closest relationship is *1 Enoch*. Thus the scanty biblical information about Enoch is enhanced in *Jubilees* with the details that he was the first person to learn to write, that he understood calendrical and astronomical matters, that he had knowledge revealed to him by angels and that he is even now recording the deeds of people for judgement (4.16–25; for further parallels with *1 Enoch* see e.g. 5.1–2; 7.20–9). There may be some literary dependence between the two texts, which probably works both ways, as *1 Enoch* is made up of five sections dating from

different periods, some composed earlier than *Jubilees* and others later (see further below, Chapter 6).

Perhaps the most noticeable distinctive feature of *Jubilees* is the way in which the author links laws to scriptural texts and presents Israel's ancestors as keeping these statutes even before the time of the Sinai covenant. So, for example, the regulations about the purification of women after childbirth (see Lev. 12.2–5) are related to the creation narrative and the example of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (3.8–14), and the actions of Dinah's brothers in avenging her rape by Shechem are used as justification for an eternal prohibition on Jews marrying gentiles (30.7–17; cf. Gen. 34.1–31). This technique serves to imbue the whole of Jewish law with full patriarchal authority.

It is also striking that the wives of all the key scriptural figures are named in *Jubilees*, and details provided of their paternal lineage. It seems that the author wishes to stress the genealogical purity of the line of Israelites through whom God established the covenant, which included no gentiles or others who might be considered unworthy (see e.g. 34.20–1 for a list of the names of the wives of the sons of Jacob). This feature has attracted the attention of scholars like Betsy Halpern-Amaru, who has examined in particular the reworking of the narratives about Isaac's wife Rebecca. She concludes that one of the messages of *Jubilees* is that marrying outside the nation – or even outside the extended family – will always result in negative consequences and is a threat to the ethnic purity of Israel. This, together with the book's emphasis on the importance of circumcision, leads her to suggest that it was written partly in response to a rise in gentile conversion in this period, and that its author belonged to a group which opposed this on principle and did not regard children born of Jewish men and gentile women as true Jews.<sup>6</sup> All the rewritten Bible texts show a similar concern to identify characters unnamed in the Bible and provide lists of the wives and children of Israel's ancestors, although they rarely agree on these names. Pseudo-Philo demonstrates an even greater interest in minor women characters than *Jubilees*, as will be seen in the discussion below of the *Biblical Antiquities*.

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<sup>6</sup> B. Halpern-Amaru, *The Empowerment of Women in the Book of Jubilees*. 1999, Leiden: Brill; see esp. pp. 147–59.

### Important themes in *Jubilees*

At the heart of the *Book of Jubilees* lies the theme of God's covenant relationship with the people of Israel. This special bond is traced right back to the time of creation, when God is depicted as saying to the angels: 'I shall separate for myself a people from among all the nations. And they will be my people and I will be their God' (2.19).<sup>7</sup> This covenant is first made with Noah (6.4), renewed with the patriarchs Abraham (14.20; 15.4) and Jacob (27.22–4), and God will be eternally faithful to it, despite the Israelites' many sins (e.g. 1.5). *Jubilees* is concerned to stress from the outset that God knew that the covenant people would go on to commit evil deeds (1.5–18), perhaps in response to developing theological questions about whether God was not powerful enough to control the chosen people, or had made a poor choice in the first place. Israel's divine right to inhabit the promised land is also defended, which may suggest that the author was responding to contemporary challenges to their ownership of it. The account of the division of the earth among Noah's descendants, for example, claims that the territory now occupied by the Jews had always been intended by God for the Israelites, but was wrongfully seized by Canaan for him and his descendants to dwell in, although he had other land assigned to him (10.27–34), so any Canaanite claim to it must be illegitimate.

This emphasis on covenant brings with it a focus on the laws which serve to maintain it. Thus the author exhorts his audience particularly forcefully to avoid idolatry (e.g. 1.8–11; 12.1–5; 36.5), intermarriage with gentiles (e.g. 20.4; 22.20; 25.1; 30.7–13) and anything which detracts from the distinctiveness and ethnic purity of Israel: 'Separate yourself from the gentiles . . . and do not perform deeds like theirs . . . because . . . all of their ways are contaminated, and despicable, and abominable' (22.16). This is one of the reasons why commentators suggest that *Jubilees* emerged from within circles of Jews who opposed any accommodation with the Hellenization programme of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and other foreign rulers. The text's warning against nakedness (3.31) may, for instance, be a response to the Graeco-Roman practice of exercising naked in the

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<sup>7</sup> All translations of the text are taken from O.S. Wintermute, 'Jubilees'. In *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* Vol. 2. Ed J.H. Charlesworth. 1985, New York, Doubleday, pp. 35-142.



gymnasium, an institution apparently introduced into Jerusalem not long before *Jubilees* was written (see 1 Macc. 1.13–14; 2 Macc. 4.9–14).

Perhaps the most important laws for the author of *Jubilees* concern sabbath observance. The importance of this commandment is enhanced in a lengthy addition to the creation account (2.17–33), and the book closes with a detailed reminder of the sabbath laws and their solemnity (50.1–13). It is said that the angels kept the sabbath with God from the very beginning of creation (2.18, 30), and among humans its observance is presented as a special privilege of the Israelites: ‘The creator of all blessed it [i.e. the seventh day], but he did not sanctify any people or nations to keep the sabbath thereon with the sole exception of Israel’ (2.31; cf. 50.10). This emphasis may be a sign that these regulations were being contested at this time or that many Jews felt no need to keep them strictly. It may also indicate that the author was of priestly descent, as he shows particular interest in other ritual matters, too, such as circumcision (15.25–34) and the proper celebration of festivals like Passover (49.1–23). Levi, the first priest (30.18), is accorded particular prominence in *Jubilees*. When Jacob takes his sons to see his father Isaac, for instance, Levi is the first to receive his grandfather’s blessing (31.11–17). In a significant statement about the role of the priestly line in transmitting Israel’s ancient traditions, it is also claimed that before his death Jacob passed on to Levi books containing the patriarchal wisdom so that he might preserve them and renew them for his sons until this day’ (45.15). Other ancestral figures like Adam and Enoch are seen acting like priests, offering incense and sacrifices, for example (3.27; 4.25).

One of the most striking characteristics of *Jubilees* is the repeated claim that the patriarchs celebrated the main festivals, like Firstfruits and the Day of Atonement, even though these feast days actually emerged at a later point in history (see e.g. 6.17–19; 15.1; 16.20–7; 22.1). This technique parallels the reading back into the patriarchal period of the laws first given at Sinai, discussed above, and it serves to highlight the antiquity and importance of these festivals, which may have been questioned by some Jews at the time. Significantly, it enables the author to give divine, scriptural authority to his interpretation of precisely how and when these days are to be celebrated.

This question of the correct calendrical system, and the related matter of chronology and dating, is another central theme in *Jubilees*. The book argues strongly for a 364-day solar calendar rather than one governed by the moon. In the account of creation, for example, it is explicitly stated that God gave the sun and not the moon the determining role in matters of festivals and dates (2.9; cf. 1.14). The rewritten Bible format enables the author to interweave his own views on this subject with the underlying biblical narrative; so, for instance, he inserts a lengthy warning about the dangers of failing to follow the solar calendar into a speech of God to Noah after the flood (6.32–8). A 364-day calendar is divisible into exactly 52 weeks, so all the festivals and other important dates fall on the same day of the week every year. In the view of the circles behind *Jubilees*, it was extremely important to know when to celebrate festivals, as their validity or the effectiveness of their rituals cannot be guaranteed unless they are celebrated on the correct, sacred day.

This solar calendar features in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g. *Psalms Scroll* 27.4–7; *Commentary on Genesis A* 2.2–3; cf. *Community Rule* 1.13–15; *Damascus Document* 6.18–19) and the Enochic literature (see especially *1 En.* 72–82), and is possibly presupposed also by parts of the Hebrew Bible, such as Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, and Ezekiel.<sup>8</sup> It is, therefore, a very ancient system within Judaism, and it is likely that a wholesale move to a lunar calendar only came about at the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The debate prompted by this change is reflected in texts such as Daniel 7.25, and it was apparently strenuously opposed by traditionalists such as those who stand behind the *Book of Jubilees*.

The solar calendar forms the basis for a wider chronological scheme, which is one of the most noteworthy aspects of the book. So each period of seven years is termed a ‘week’ of years, and each period of seven times a week of years, or 49 years, is called a ‘jubilee’. More precise dates than those found in Scripture are given throughout *Jubilees*; so, for example, it was ‘in the first year of the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt, in the third month on the

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<sup>8</sup> The theory that a solar calendar was used in Old Testament times has been defended in particular by Annie Jaubert, who has also argued that Jesus and his disciples followed this calendrical system; see her *La date de la cène: Calendrier biblique et liturgie chrétienne*. 1957, Paris: Gabalda.

sixteenth day of that month' (1.1) that God called Moses up to receive the law on Mount Sinai. In another example of this tendency, it is stated that Adam and Eve lived for exactly seven years in the Garden of Eden and left it after succumbing to the serpent's tempting on the first day of the fourth month (3.32; for further examples see 42.1; 45.11; 46.8; 47.1).

The activity of angels and evil spirits is taken for granted in *Jubilees*, as in the majority of other writings from the Second Temple period, but there is little interest in naming them or in distinguishing between their roles, so speculation in this area was perhaps at an early stage. Only Beliar (1.20) and Mastema the prince of evil spirits (e.g. 10.8; 11.5, 11; 48.2–19) are named; Mastema's role is particularly significant, as he is behind a plot to test Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac (17.16; 18.12), and he tried to prevent Moses from freeing the Hebrew slaves at the time of the exodus (48.2–19). These spirits explain the presence of evil in a world created by a good God, because they are charged with leading people astray (e.g. 10.1–2; 11.4–5; 12.20), although the majority of them are now said to have been bound in the depths of the earth until the day of judgement (5.6–11; 10.7–9; cf. *1 En.* 10.12–13; 14.5).

The angels are introduced by their rank rather than by name, with the angels of the presence and the angels of sanctification being the most senior (e.g. 2.2, 18). Lesser angelic powers control the forces of nature within the world, such as wind, fire and the seasons (2.2), and teach skills to people (3.15). The creation account in *Jubilees* makes clear that the angels or spirits were actually created by God (2.2), so are not equal to God, and they have a particular role in ministering to God in heaven as priests do on earth (30.18). Israel is presented as the nation most similar to the angels, who are, for example, born circumcised (15.27), and who observe the sabbath in heaven (2.18).

Finally, the central role accorded to Jacob in *Jubilees* is noteworthy. Abraham interacts with Jacob in a way that he does not in the book of Genesis, where the report of Abraham's death (Gen. 25.7–10) precedes the announcement of the birth of Esau and Jacob (Gen. 25.19–27). In *Jubilees*, Abraham meets Jacob several times, blesses him more than once (e.g. 19.26–9; 22.10–30), and encourages his mother Rebecca to favour her younger son over his brother, as he

knows that Jacob is the one through whom the covenant promises will be fulfilled (e.g. 19.17–25). The effect of this rewriting of the scriptural narrative is that Abraham is active for longer and Jacob becomes important sooner, which serves to minimize the role of Isaac. The reason for this emphasis on Jacob cannot now be identified with certainty, but it seems to relate to the author's view that the covenant is passed on through a pure line focused on key individuals like Abraham and Jacob, who were chosen and blessed by God.

### The *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo

#### Introduction to the *Biblical Antiquities*

The *Biblical Antiquities* retells parts of the biblical narrative from the time of Adam to the rise of David and the death of Saul, employing a mixture of omission, summary and expansion of the scriptural material; very few episodes are retold without amendment. This work is rather longer than *Jubilees*, and the author focuses on some scriptural characters in particular, such as Moses and several of Israel's judges. Its author, known as Pseudo-Philo, does not begin with the account of creation, a narrative which is considerably developed in *Jubilees*, but he continues his account to a much later period of Israel's history. There is, then, a significant difference in the sections of Scripture chosen for retelling in the works of rewritten Bible, which can provide clues to their context and purpose.

For many centuries the *Biblical Antiquities* was ascribed to the well-known first-century Jewish writer Philo because its Latin version was preserved and transmitted together with Latin translations of Philo's works. It is therefore often still referred to by its Latin title, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, or by the abbreviation *L.A.B.* This was a historical accident, however, as it was clearly not composed by Philo, who wrote in Greek and in a very different style. Instead, the author was probably a Jew who lived in Palestine and wrote in Hebrew; the work was then translated into Greek and from Greek into Latin.

There is a widespread scholarly consensus that the *Biblical Antiquities* is to be dated to the late first century CE, although there is