

Josephus in Modern Jewish Culture

Edited by

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Josephus in Early Modern Jewish Thought from Menasseh to Spinoza

Jacob Abolafia

In September 1655, Menasseh ben Israel set out across the North Sea on a mission to Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth. The mission was the most momentous of Menasseh's life. In it, he had invested the last of his money and the last of his hopes for an event of messianic significance – the readmission of the Jews to England. Uncertain of the outcome, Menasseh did not bring his whole household and cannot have burdened himself with much of his vast library. One book he did have with him in London, however, was a Greek-Latin edition of Flavius Josephus's *Opera*.¹

Why did this eminent rabbi so prize a writer long treated as tangential at best, to the orthodox tradition? What was so important about Josephus's work that Menasseh, as will be discussed below, even thought it merited a new translation into the sacred tongue? And why did Josephus and his work have a hold on Menasseh's attention in the midst of a crucial mission to resolve the desperate plight of the Jewish diaspora? The answers to these questions can be found in an extraordinary moment in the long and fraught relationship between Josephus and his Jewish readership. It was a moment when Menasseh's community, the judaized *conversos* of the Sephardic world, reintroduced Josephus to the mainstream of Jewish religious and political thought. The moment was a brief one, for the great heterodox scion of this community, Baruch de Spinoza, would soon put an end to the short-lived reconciliation between Josephus and the Jews.

1 Menasseh ben Israel refers to 'the Geneva edition' with page number in *Vindiciae Judaeorum*, 120; see also n. 53 below. The English translations of *The Hope of Israel* (Spanish and Latin: Amsterdam, 1650; English: London, 1650 and 1652), *Vindiciae Judaeorum* (London, 1656), and other works of Menasseh are, unless otherwise noted, from Lucien Wolf's collection *Menasseh ben Israel's Mission to Oliver Cromwell: Being a reprint of the Pamphlets published by Menasseh ben Israel to promote the Re-admission of the Jews to England 1649–1656* (London, 1901). Page numbers for those works refer to this edition.

1 'Our Josephus': Sephardic Intellectuals, Jewish Apologetics, and the Place of Josephus

More than thirty years after Menasseh's mission, in 1687, Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, longtime leader of the Amsterdam Spanish-Portuguese community (and signatory to Spinoza's writ of excommunication), published a *haskamah* (note of approbation) for a new translation into Spanish of Josephus's *Against Apion*. In it, he refers to the ancient historian as 'our famous Josephus' (*nosso famoso Iossepho*)² and hails the work as beneficial for 'the recreation of the God-fearing, and his Sacred Glory, and the honour of his Divine Laws, and praise of those who are observant'. Josephus, long the adopted son of Christian sacred history, was being publicly celebrated as a native son by a Jewish community.

There seems to have been a strong elective affinity between the first-generation *ex-conversos* and this ancient Judaeian historian. In order to understand this attraction, and the meaning and consequences of the reintroduction of Josephus into Jewish thought, it is necessary to first say something about the exceptionality of the *ex-converso nação* ('nation') and its *Sitz im Leben*. As almost half a century of scholarship has made abundantly clear, the escaped *conversos* were unlike any other Jewish community in history. They were, as a group, the Jews with the highest shared level of secular education since the Hellenistic age. Among the well-to-do, a command of Latin could be presumed and decent Greek was not unusual. Many male members of the community had attended the finest universities in Spain and Portugal, where they encountered the most up-to-date cultural and philosophical trends, from the *culturismo* and *conceptismo* of the literati to the neo-scholasticism of the Dominican and Jesuit philosophers.³ Despite the widespread restrictions against 'New Christians' in Iberia, some even held

2 'Aprovacion del Magnifico y Venerable Señor, YSHAC ABUAB DA FONSECA Insigne Predicador, Doctor, y Maestro en la primer Catedra, del la Sagrada Theologia', in *Respuesta de Josepho. Contra Apion Alexandrino. Traduzida Por el Capitán Joseph Semah Arias. Dedicada Al Doctissimo Señor Yshac Orobio de Castro, Catedrático de Medicina en la Universidad de Sevilla y en la de Tolosa, Professor, Medico, y Consejero, del Rey de Francia.* (Amsterdam, 1687). For more on the translation, see Natalio Fernandez Marcos, 'José Semah Arias traductor de Flavio Josefo', in *Los Judaizantes en Europa y la Literatura Castellana del Siglo de Oro*, ed. Fernando Díaz Esteban (Madrid, 1994), 141–54. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

3 For an overview of the cultural and intellectual background of the *conversos*, see Yosef Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism: The Story of Isaac Orobio de Castro*, trans. Raphael Loewe (Oxford, 1989), 308–25; and Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton, 1989), 40–84. For the vast secular reading of even Amsterdam's most orthodox rabbis, see Shlomo Berger, 'Codices Gentium: Rabbi Isaac Aboab's Collection of Classical Literature', *Studia Rosenthaliana* 29 (1995): 5–13.

academic chairs or government posts before emigrating. Upon reaching a safe haven in Amsterdam, they set up literary clubs and wrote poetry for one another. Luminaries like Menasseh and Orobio de Castro delighted in learned exchanges with the most famous names in the contemporary intellectual world, maintaining friendships (and conducting disputations) with gentile correspondents.⁴

The worldliness and sophistication of these newly returned Jews went hand in hand with a particularly insular form of self-identification. The members of this community referred to themselves as men of the *nação*. The attitude of this 'nation' was, on the whole, dismissive of converts, other ethnicities, and even Jews of different origin. Conversely (and to their fellow Jews, perversely), their sense of community did extend to those Jews still living as 'New Christians' in the Iberian world.⁵ Other Jewish communities have boasted erudite members, and many have had restricted senses of belonging and membership. The *conversos* of the *nação* (and other Sephardim, like Samuel Shullam, the first Hebrew translator of Josephus) were unique in building their association on a shared experience of dual identity. Many adults were raised in the world of the Iberian Baroque, with all that this entailed for their educations, worldviews, and senses of self – only to find out (whether at six, thirteen, twenty, or some other age) that their *true* identity was something different.⁶ These secret Jews lived double lives, inhabiting both their identities and neither one simultaneously; choosing the new identity and building a new life around it, while still speaking the language of the old one. As a result, these *conversos* may be the first people to inhabit the modern situation of uncertainty and alienation concerning self, identity, and belonging.⁷

4 See Cecil Roth, *A Life of Menasseh ben Israel: Rabbi, Printer, and Diplomat* (Philadelphia, 1945), 140–75.

5 See Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Bloomington, 1997), ch. 1; Yosef Kaplan, 'Political Concepts in the World of the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam during the Seventeenth Century: The Problem of Exclusion and the Boundaries of Self-Identity', in *Menasseh ben Israel and His World*, ed. Yosef Kaplan, Henry Méchoulán, and Richard H. Popkin (Leiden, 1989), 45–62. For the origins of this cohesive communal identity, see Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto: Isaac Cardoso – A Study in Seventeenth-Century Marranism and Jewish Apologetics* (Washington, D.C., 1981), 7, 12–21.

6 The precise moment of 'Judaizing' – or of the cognizance of Jewish identity, varied from person to person.

7 Many have pointed out this double structure of the existential condition of the marrano. Some have even suggested that secular modernity and the entire *Weltanschauung* of metaphysical imminence emerges from it. See especially Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*; and Yovel, *The Other Within: The Marranos – Split Identity and Emerging Modernity* (Princeton, 2009).

These elements of the *nação*, its conflicted relationship with forms of identity and its uniquely grounded mode of thinking, are relevant because they help to explain why Flavius Josephus held such pride of place in this community's cultural lexicon, a position he had never before held in Jewish life. In the letter cited above, Isaac Aboab claimed Josephus as 'ours'. Menasseh ben Israel uses almost the same phrase, calling him 'our famous Historian'.⁸ That this 'ours' refers not only to the Jews, but in some sense to the *ex-conversos* of the *nação* more particularly is suggested by the fact that the most brilliant (orthodox) member of the Amsterdam community, Isaac Orobio de Castro, was called by Semah Arias 'the Josephus of our time' – a sobriquet that would have echoed nicely in Amsterdam's Jewish salons and shows the esteem in which apologetic writing was held.⁹ It is hard to imagine any other Jewish community of the time using 'Josephus' as unabashedly as a point of reference for communal pride. One practical reason for this is Josephus's place in the classical curriculum as it existed in the Iberian universities of the late Renaissance and Baroque. For many *conversos*, Josephus (and other Hellenistic Jewish texts preserved by the Church Fathers) would have been some of the only non-biblical sources of information concerning Jewish tradition available within the Iberian world, and these texts were probably read with interest by escaped *conversos* both before and after emigration.¹⁰ Consequently, these Spanish refugees were among the first Jews who could treat Josephus as a shared text without the mediation of the Hebrew *Sefer Yosippon* (a medieval chronicle which, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was still widely held to be a work of Josephus).

This brief sketch of the character of the Western Sephardim provides some sense of why Josephus was so significant to them. One can well envisage how Josephus, whom Tessa Rajak has called 'the outsiders' insider and the insiders' outsider'¹¹ would have held a special fascination to people who had lived so entirely within the gentile world. It must not be forgotten that the world of Hellenistic Judaism had only just been rediscovered, and the model of Jews who were clearly at home in the non-Jewish, classical world was a relative

8 Menasseh ben Israel, *The Hope of Israel*, 'Preface to the Reader', 7. In the Spanish version (Amsterdam, 1650), it reads 'Iosepho insigne historiador la suya', presumably addressing fellow Jews.

9 Semah Arias, *Respuesta de Josepho*, Dedication; Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism*, vii.

10 For the limited sources of information about Judaism in Iberia under the inquisition, see Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*, 289.

11 Tessa Rajak, 'Josephus in Rome: The Outsiders' Insider and Insiders' Outsider', *Scripta Classica Israelica* 33 (2014): 191–208.

novelty, coming as it did in the wake of the Renaissance rediscovery of Philo and the world of educated Alexandrian Judaism.¹² As a Jewish historian who spoke the language of Plato and connected Aristotle with the world of the rabbinic sages, Josephus straddled some of the same gaps in identity with which the *ex-conversos* themselves were faced.¹³

Of course, the Western Sephardic intellectuals who were so fond of Josephus hardly needed such abstract reasons for making use of him – they had quite enough practical ones. Both Menasseh and Orobio de Castro engaged in recurring polemical or apologetic disputes with Christian theologians. In these, Josephus was their trusted witness, ‘our’ witness, to the time of Christ, all the more useful because their Christian Hebraist opponents held Josephus in equal regard.¹⁴ The most comprehensive work of Jewish apologetics written by one of the escaped Sephardim, Isaac Cardoso’s *Las Excelencias de los Hebreos*, is deeply indebted to Josephus. Cardoso, perhaps the most learned in secular matters of any of the escaped *conversos*, used Josephus to defuse the ‘calumnies’ of antiquity, particularly those emerging from Tacitus, with the credible testimony of an ancient Jewish witness.¹⁵ At least one gentile reader even compared Orobio himself favourably (if grudgingly) to Josephus.¹⁶

Both these Jewish and gentile scholars were familiar with the more controversial passages in Josephus’s work. In a letter to a Christian theologian who enquired about his opinion on the *Testimonium Flavianum*, Menasseh ben Israel writes that we can be certain that the report on Jesus is apocryphal because Josephus was entirely constant in his devotion to the Jewish religion, and ‘till his death, never exceeded or wavered from its bounds’ despite being

12 See Anthony Grafton, ‘Christian Hebraism and the Rediscovery of Hellenistic Judaism’, in *Jewish Culture in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of David B. Ruderman*, ed. Richard I. Cohen et al. (Pittsburgh, PA, 2014), 169–80.

13 For the same reasons, the historical writings of Philo were also taken up by many of the authors mentioned in this chapter, although not to the same extent, and he was not translated. We may assume that the theoretical works of Philo were too corrupted by Christian usage for contemporary Jewish tastes.

14 See Herman Prins Salomon, ‘Menasseh ben Israel, Saul Levi Mortera et le “Testimonium Flavianum”’, *Studia Rosenthaliana* 21 (1991): 31–41, and Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism*, 255.

15 These calumnies were a major battleground of early modern polemic, as Cardoso, and, we shall see, Spinoza, knew well. See Isaac Cardoso, *Las Excelencias de los Hebreos* (Amsterdam, 1679), 333–39.

16 The German scholar Johann Albert Fabricius; see Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*, 475. Yerushalmi himself makes the comparison between Josephus’s *Against Apion* and Cardoso’s *Las Excelencias*, expressing the hope that the latter might be adopted by modern Jews, much as Cardoso and his contemporaries adopted the former (Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*, 485).

hated and mistrusted by both the Romans and by his countrymen, the Jews.¹⁷ For the men of the 'nation', educated Spaniards who had chosen the path of a demanding and devout Judaism, Josephus may have been familiar not only as a fellow mediator between the learned gentile and religious Jewish worlds,¹⁸ but also as someone whose identity was not truly understood by either his fellows or his enemies. In Menasseh's mention of Josephus's dishonour among his Jewish contemporaries, a fact generally downplayed by early modern Jewish readers of Josephus, it is possible to discern a faint echo of the liminal experience of the 'nation' and its members.

Any Sephardic reader of Josephus might have felt this identification with the great defender of the faith, the Jew isolated from the main body of his people and living in the bosom of an implacable foe. For this reason, the propagation of Josephus among the Jews was a task worthy of 'another Josephus' (as Isaac Aboab da Fonseca implied, punning on Joseph Semah Arias's name).¹⁹ In his dedication, Semah Arias is not shy about the apologetic and polemical uses to which Josephus might be put. He has published his translation 'for both the Glory of God, and for the honour of our Nation (*Nacion*), which I hope will serve you as a Mirror, in which you may see, and proceed to imitate the Grandeur, Valour, and Loyalty of our Ancestors'.²⁰ The pathos of this passage is tangible, laden as it is with words of particular resonance for members of the *Nacion* (here in its particular meaning for *conversos* – both those returned to Judaism and those still in hiding).²¹ Also striking is the appeal to honour (*honra*), one of the guiding social principles of the *ex-converso* communities, and a word used by the Inquisition and in the Iberian aristocracy to exclude and isolate New Christians.²² Josephus was the figurative looking glass in which these newly returned Jews could recognize a version of Jewish pride that of necessity occupied two worlds, Jewish and gentile.²³

Semah Arias also saw in Josephus, as have many others throughout the ages, an able apologist for the Jewish people. For non-Jewish readers, he hopes Josephus will show them evidence of Jewish amity, antiquity, and 'grand and

17 For the text of the letter, and on this exchange, see Salomon, 'Menasseh ben Israel'. This is one of the only moments where these Jewish readers of Josephus admit to his less-than-perfect reputation among his own people.

18 So Sina Rauschenbach, *Judentum für Christen: Vermittlung und Selbstbehauptung Menasseh ben Israels in den gelehrten Debatten des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 2012), 165.

19 Semah Arias, *Respuesta de Josepho*, 'Aprovacion'.

20 Semah Arias, *Respuesta de Josepho*, 'Al Doctissimo Señor Yshaac Orobio De Casto'.

21 See Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, 6–13.

22 See Kaplan, 'Political Concepts', 57; and Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism*, 325.

23 See Marcos, 'José Semah Arias', 154.

heroic' actions; the fidelity and respect that Jews have always had for the states in which they were subjects; and the steadfastness and perseverance with which Jews have suffered in the name of their faith. The defence of Jewish honour was still a very necessary project: 'If you are ignorant and stupid like Apion, I write against you, as Josephus did.'²⁴ That the esteem for this side of Josephus was clearly shared by Menasseh ben Israel is apparent from the title of his planned 'Heroic History' – a continuation of Josephus's *Antiquities* up to the present.²⁵

2 Political Hebraism and Diaspora Political Thought

At the same time as these Western Sephardic intellectuals were reclaiming Josephus, the ancient historian was also a favoured author of another intellectual circle, a world paradoxically removed from and in communication with that of the *ex-conversos*: the 'Republic of Letters' of the early modern Christian Hebraists.²⁶ If the Sephardic world had begun to take up and even to translate Josephus during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,²⁷ seven vernacular editions of the *Antiquities* and *Jewish War* appeared in the sixteenth century in the Low Countries alone (in addition to numerous reprints of the 1544 *editio princeps* and the 1611 bilingual edition).²⁸ Josephus was a shared obsession of many of Menasseh ben Israel's gentile friends and correspondents, including the scholars Caspar Barlaeus, Gerardus and Dionysius Vossius, Hugo Grotius, and Petrus Cunaeus; as well as the theologian Christopher Arnold. The meaning of Josephus for this non-Jewish humanistic readership is well studied.²⁹ Aside from philological and historical value, Josephus presented the

24 Semah Arias, *Respuesta de Josepho*, 'Al Doctissimo Señor Yshaac Orobio De Casto'.

25 He announces the project in the 'Preface' to *The Hope of Israel*, 7, among other places.

26 For an overview of Josephus's role in Dutch Christian Hebraism, see Theo Dunkelgrün, "'Neerlands Israel': Political Theology, Christian Hebraism, Biblical Antiquarianism, and Historical Myth', in *Myth in History, History in Myth*, ed. Laura Cruz and Willem Frijhoff (Leiden, 2009), 201–36. Dunkelgrün also provides an entry into the voluminous bibliography touching the subject.

27 The first of these translations to appear, appended to the edition of Abraham Zacut's *Sefer Yuhasin* (Constantinople, 1566), was by a physician of Iberian descent, Samuel Shullam. The next would have been Menasseh's (see below), and third was Semah Arias's.

28 Dunkelgrün, "'Neerlands Israel'", 215.

29 Among the many important contributions to the study of Josephus and the Hebraists are François Laplanche, 'L'Érudition Chrétienne aux XVI^e et XVII^e Siècles et l'État des Hébreux', in Groupe de Recherches Spinozistes, *L'Écriture Sainte au temps de Spinoza et dans le système spinoziste* (Paris, 1992), 133–47; Christopher R. Ligota, 'L'histoire à fondement

possibility of a divinely inspired (or even divinely ruled) polity in the idiom of ancient constitutional theory, allowing a fusion of Christian sacred history and pagan political philosophy. For these scholars, humanists, and political thinkers, Josephus was the key to understanding the ancient Israelite state, which could serve as a model for the politics of the new 'Netherlands Israel'.³⁰ In this sense, the Christian Hebraists and *ex-converso* Sephardim occupied a similar intellectual space – both were interested in unifying classical humanist training with a 'Hebraic' outlook.³¹

For non-Jewish Dutch scholars, fondness for Josephus was often connected to distinct political projects, usually of a Republican and Remonstrant bent, a form of political Hebraism that I have elsewhere termed 'Josephism'.³² The political thought of Jewish readers of Josephus was hardly systematic in the same way.³³ Some authors, such as Isaac Cardoso and Isaac Orobio de Castro did, however, use Josephus in support of a particular rhetorical interpretation of Jewish political life. In the freedom-loving environment of the Dutch Republic, Josephus (among others) provided evidence to suggest that the natural state of Jewish political life might very well be a 'self-governed republic' like, these authors claimed, the semi-autonomous structures of Western Sephardic congregations (first and foremost, Amsterdam).³⁴ These authors were, directly or indirectly, engaging with a question about the meaning of Jewish politics that went back to Don Isaac Abravanel: Is the diaspora inimical to Jewish political organization as long as there is no Jewish sovereign (monarch), or

théologique: la République des Hébreux', in *ibid.*, 149–67; Lea Campos Boralevi, 'Classical Foundational Myths of European Republicanism: The Jewish Commonwealth', in *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, ed. Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, 2002), vol. 1, 247–61; Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2010).

30 For a more extensive discussion of this subject, see Jacob Abolafia, 'Spinoza, Josephus, and the Critique of the Hebrew Republic', *History of Political Thought* 35 (2014): 295–316, with bibliography.

31 See, e.g., Campos Boralevi, 'Classical Foundational Myths', 255. Of course, for the Jews, there was the added difficulty of reconciling the classics, the Bible, and the Hellenistic Jews with the rabbinic tradition. See Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, 96–131.

32 See Abolafia, 'Spinoza, Josephus', 302–3.

33 See Kaplan, 'Political Concepts', and Miriam Bodian, 'Biblical Hebrews and the Rhetoric of Republicanism: Seventeenth-Century Portuguese Jews on the Jewish Community', *AJS Review* 22 (1997): 199–221 (220–21).

34 See Bodian, 'Biblical Hebrews'; and Anne O. Albert, 'Post-Sabbatian Politics: Reflections on Governance Among the Spanish and Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam, 1665–1683' (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2008), 185–211.

should diaspora Jewish communities, rightly organized, be considered to be sovereign Jewish entities in and of themselves?³⁵

Cardoso, Orobio, and others took up this communalistic approach to understanding Jewish political life, often buttressing their arguments with references to the texts of Hellenistic Judaism. These ancient texts seemed to suggest that autonomous Jewish communities had existed in gentile lands since before the destruction of the Temple and had functioned as a sort of independent polity, called, as they were, *politeiai* ('republics'). Writing from Venice, Isaac Cardoso cites a passage where Josephus quotes Strabo to the effect that Jews live in many provinces worldwide, wherein they practice their religion, maintain grand congregations (growing all the time), 'and live with their own laws'.³⁶ Two similar passages from Philo are also adduced. The ultimate example is Alexandria where the Jews had governors 'of their own nation, with absolute power (*potestad absoluta*), as if [the community] were a republic in itself'.³⁷ Cardoso notes later that the conditions for self-governance are satisfied by ritual knowledge and traditional conformance to the law.³⁸ Once again, Hellenistic Judaism provided a good mirror for these early modern Jews, who tried to see in the semi-autonomous and thriving Alexandrian community a reflection of their own recently secured rights in some places in Europe.³⁹

Perhaps it should not surprise us that the writers of the 'nation' in Holland, who enjoyed more autonomy than perhaps any other Jewish community, went even further in their comparisons. In Amsterdam, the soldier, playwright, and poet-for-hire Daniel Levi de Barrios was inspired by both the language of the 'Hebrew Republic' so *au courant* in intellectual conversation, and by the example set by Cardoso. In his *Triumph of Popular Government*, De Barrios is bolder than Cardoso – explicitly identifying the Jewish exilic constitution as a 'democracy' and claiming that the Amsterdam community exhibits such

35 For an introduction to this conversation and more bibliography, see Anne Oravetz Albert, "A Civil Death": Sovereignty and the Jewish Republic in an Early Modern Treatment of Genesis 49:10', in *Jewish Culture in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of David B. Ruderman*, ed. Richard I. Cohen et al. (Pittsburgh, PA, 2014), 63–72.

36 Cardoso, *Excelencias*, 16. Cf. Josephus, *AJ* 14.12.

37 *Ibid.*, 17.

38 *Ibid.*, 22.

39 See Albert, 'A Civil Death'; Bodian, 'Biblical Hebrews'; and Miriam Bodian, 'The Biblical "Jewish Republic" and the Dutch "New Israel" in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Thought', *Hebraic Political Studies* 1 (2006): 186–202. For the actual struggle of Alexandrian Jews for equal political rights, see Aryeh Kasher, *The Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt: The Struggle for Equal Rights* (Tübingen, 1985).

a constitution.⁴⁰ In Amsterdam, the self-government of the Jews is not only found in the Torah, but also in the communal organizations they impose upon themselves to enforce adherence to the ritual law. After quoting the passages cited above from Cardoso at length, De Barrios affirms that ‘those Israelites or Jews who do not rebuild the Second Temple will not lose their democratic government.’⁴¹

De Barrios, it should be noted, did not restrict his use of the Hebrew Republic metaphor (and his citations of the Hellenistic Jewish corpus) to this work. In other panegyric compositions, he referred explicitly to the ‘Hebrew Republic’ (borrowing the title of Cunaeus’s famous book) in his praise for the noble actions of communal leaders.⁴² This suggests that the comparison would have been familiar (and welcome) to other members of the Amsterdam community. Most radical of all these writers was Isaac Orobio de Castro in his *Provenciones Divinas*. The ‘modern Josephus’ of Amsterdam held that rabbinical authorities ‘are absolute judges of the [Jewish] people throughout the world, not only in what pertains to ceremonial rules and legal precepts, but also in all civil and criminal law.’⁴³ And what of the right of capital punishment, usually synonymous with the right of sovereignty? For Orobio, that famous tool of the diasporic leadership (especially in Amsterdam), the excommunication (*herem*), was paramount to ‘a civil death.’⁴⁴ From Alexandria to Amsterdam, there was no inherent barrier to fully realized Jewish political life in the diaspora. These *ex-conversos*, we might surmise, did not see themselves as

40 Anne O. Albert’s translation of the *Triumpho del Gobierno Popular* (Amsterdam, 1683) in *Early Modern Workshop: Jewish history resources* (2004), vol. 1, 99–118 (103). Those familiar with the history of the Amsterdam community and its *Mahamad* will find De Barrios’s panegyric rather unbelievable.

41 *Ibid.*, 108.

42 See Daniel Levi de Barrios, *Triumpho del Gobierno Populo en Casa de Jacob* (Amsterdam, 1683), 22, where he says Mardojay and David Franco Mendes live ‘con la nobleza, y discrecion que gozan continuamente honorificos cargod en la Republica Hebrea como sus insignes Antepasados’. (I cite the version from the mss., Ros19G12).

43 Isaac Orobio de Castro, *Provenciones Divinas contra la vana idolatria de las Gentes* (Amsterdam, 1679) Mss: Hs. Ros 631, p. 74. Albert’s translation in ‘A Civil Death’, 64.

44 See Albert, ‘A Civil Death’, which brought to my attention this strain of Jewish political thought. Interestingly, the Christian Hebraist and ‘Josephist’ John Selden used the example of excommunication as a civil penalty to advance his Erastian agenda, and it is not impossible that the Jewish and Christian reception of Josephus cross-pollinated on this point (it is not clear if Orobio read Selden, although later, Mendelssohn certainly did). See Eric Nelson, ‘From Selden to Mendelssohn: Hebraism and Religious Freedom’, in *Freedom and the Construction of Europe*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen, vol. 1, *Religious and Constitutional Liberties* (Cambridge, 2013), 94–114 (97).

having emerged from hiding into a state of exile – some were quite content with diaspora as a locus for Jewish life, lived fully.

Despite his friendship with Cunaeus and other ‘political Hebraists’, Menasseh ben Israel seems not to have been tempted to write about the ‘Hebrew Republic’ of contemporary Jewish ‘polities’. Perhaps one whose own relations with the lay leadership in Amsterdam were fraught found it hard to idealize communal politics in the key of De Barrios or Orobio de Castro.⁴⁵ Indeed for the most part his devotion to communal, rabbinic Judaism was uncomplicated by any more theoretical considerations about political life. Despite his distance from political ‘Josephism’, Menasseh was the first of these figures to engage deeply with Josephus and the Hellenistic Jewish tradition, and his engagement with the influential historian and apologist is especially helpful in understanding the peculiar bond between the Western Sephardim and Josephus.

3 Menasseh Ben Israel and Flavius Josephus

Among the many sources, secular and rabbinic, from which Menasseh quoted so promiscuously it is clear that Josephus held special significance. Josephus appears not only in the indices of authors cited in his works, but also repeatedly in connection with projects Menasseh intended to complete (or did complete and never published). Among the occurrences of Josephus in these lists is the aforementioned ‘Heroic History’ – a continuation of Josephus up to the present day, perhaps in a similar spirit to Basnage’s famous attempt half a century later. Menasseh mentions the project in the preface to *The Hope of Israel* (among other places), lists it as ‘for the most part brought to final perfection’ in the catalogue at the end of *Piedra Gloriosa*, and mentions offhand in *Vindiciae Judaearum* that he has ‘faithfully noted’ such and such an event in his ‘continuation of Josephus’.⁴⁶ In all probability this projected work was cannibalized for other writings, including his *Humble Address* to Cromwell, but it attests to just how closely Menasseh associated Josephus’s task with his own. In Menasseh, the similarity between Hellenistic and early modern apologetics as intellectual projects reaches its fullest expression.

Surely this is due in some part to Menasseh’s integration with the gentile Republic of Letters. Menasseh would have had the best sense of anyone in the Amsterdam community at the time of how important Josephus was to

45 Menasseh was passed over for promotion several times by the *ma’amad*. See Roth, *A Life*, 50–51.

46 Menasseh ben Israel, *Vindiciae Judaearum*, 115.

the contemporary humanistic intellectual conversation.⁴⁷ His interlocutors looked to him to mediate between the world of the Jewish tradition and their scholarly interests and controversies, and they expected that he, in turn, would work to educate the ignorant Jews. As one admirer wrote to Menasseh: ‘Go on in your endeavour to acquire our learning, and to impart knowledge unto others. Although your ancestors, as Josephus attests, had good reasons for considering that the study of languages was profane, and the study of Greek philosophy almost dishonourable, the demands of the present age are altogether different.’⁴⁸

Menasseh himself was conscious of this role. In the preface to the reader in *De la fragilidad humana y inclinacion del hombre al pecado* (Amsterdam 1642), a book that emerged out of the context of fraught debates among Dutch Calvinists concerning sin, grace, and predestination,⁴⁹ he admitted to being the first of his people (*primus nostrae gentis*) to write on issues ‘usually aired by Greek and Latin authors’. From within and without, Menasseh was reminded of the similarity between his position and that of Josephus – a similarity which can only have encouraged him in his work.

Perhaps the most interesting, and frustrating, clue to Menasseh’s engagement with, and esteem for, Josephus is in his repeated hints concerning a translation of two works by Josephus – a translation which, if it ever existed, has vanished without a trace. The only hard evidence that remains of this translation is its place in a list of published and unpublished works affixed by Menasseh to his *Vindiciae Judaeorum* (1656). There he describes as ‘ready for the Presse’ ‘*Flavius Iosephus adversus Apionem* in Hebrew, *eiusdem Monarchia rationis* in Hebrew.’⁵⁰ There will be cause to parse this listing more closely below, but first it is necessary to suggest why this existence of a translation should be taken seriously, *pace* Roth, who suspects that these may have been ‘mere projects’ never seriously attempted.⁵¹ Of the books listed by Menasseh, some were almost certainly complete, for example his collected sermons. Another work, Menasseh’s translation of the Greek poet Phocylides, is first mentioned as

47 See Rauschenbach, *Judentum für Christen*, 17–47.

48 The entire letter, from scholar and messianist Johannes Möchinger, is remarkable. It is translated and printed in Meyer Kayserling, *The Life and Labours of Manasseh Ben Israel: being a contribution to the History of the Jews in England, from original sources*, trans. F. De Sola Mendes (London, 1877), 24–25.

49 On this debate see Henri Méchoulan, ‘Menasseh and the World of the Non-Jew’, in *Menasseh ben Israel and His World*, ed. Yosef Kaplan, Henry Méchoulan, and Richard H. Popkin (Leiden, 1989), 93–95.

50 Menasseh ben Israel, *Vindiciae Judaeorum*, 147.

51 Roth, *A Life*, 106.

ready for printing as early as 1641, in the preface to part two of his *Conciliador*.⁵² There is no way to know whether Menasseh's translations of (pseudo-) Phocylides, and indeed of Josephus, were from the Greek or the Latin. In the case of Josephus, we can be sure Menasseh worked from a bilingual copy, since his reference to a 'Geneva edition' with page number points to the bilingual edition of the *Opera* published in 1611.⁵³

In the same preface to the *Conciliador*, Menasseh claims he has 'in his hands' a 'Heroic History', the continuation of the *Antiquities* of Josephus, as well as 'notes [*notas*] on all the works of the same distinguished author'. This claim is repeated again in the preface to part three of that work (1650). Are these 'notes' on Josephus the same as the translation mentioned six years later?⁵⁴ It seems likely that *Against Apion* and the (spurious) 'Monarchia rationis' were the texts on which these notes were primarily developed, perhaps even approaching what Menasseh could have justifiably called a translation. There must, after all, be some reason that these texts are singled out from 'all the works' on which Menasseh had written notes. Given, however, that the translation does not appear along with his other unpublished works (like the continuation of Josephus) in the list affixed to *Piedra Gloriosa* (1655), it may cautiously be proposed that he completed ('brought for the most part to final perfection')⁵⁵ the 'translations' (whether straight translations in the modern sense, or a looser form of paraphrase) sometime in 1655–56, that is to say, while in England.⁵⁶

The next question to ask is why Menasseh would have undertaken a Hebrew edition of *Against Apion* at all, given that a translation (albeit a faulty one)

52 Cf. the preface 'Al Lector' to Menasseh ben Israel, *Conciliador o De la conveniencia de los Lugares de la S. Escritura que repugnantes entre si parecen*, part II (Amsterdam, 1641).

53 This edition used the Greek text of Arlenius's *edito maior*, and the new Latin translation of Gelenius; see Heinz Schreckenberg, *Bibliographie zu Flavius Josephus* (Leiden, 1968), 21. Marcos supposes this to be the edition used by Semah Arias for his translation as well ('José Semah Arias', 143). Even in the case of Semah Arias, whose translation is extant, the style of translation popular in the period, *sensum de sensu*, makes it difficult to determine which side of the page the translator was working from.

54 For comparison, the Phocylides translation, referred to in *Vindiciae* as 'in Spanish verse *cum notis*', is described in the *Conciliador* as 'notas'. It was never published and is not mentioned in the introduction to part III (1650). This may be because Menasseh had caught wind of the verse translation by the poet Quevedo, published in 1635, and broadly popular by two decades later (Spinoza owned a copy). See Donald G. Castanien, 'Quevedo's Translation of the Pseudo-Phocylides', *Philological Quarterly* 40 (1961): 44–52.

55 As he puts it in the *Even yeqarah*, *Piedra Gloriosa o de la Estatua de Nebuchadnesar* (Amsterdam, 1655), 'Catalogo', ii.

56 This makes a certain amount of sense, as we know Menasseh was continuing his scholarly work in England, spending time in the University Library in Cambridge, and perhaps Oxford as well; see Roth, *A Life*, 251–52.

already existed. It seems highly improbable that a bibliophile and printer like Menasseh would have been ignorant of Shullam's work, especially given that it was attached to a newly edited edition of the *Sefer Yuhasin* of Abraham Zacuto, ancestor and namesake of one of Menasseh's good friends. Of course, to the well-read and up-to-date Menasseh, Shullam's loose translation, which attributed the work to 'Yosef ha-Kohen ben Gurion', the presumed author of *Sefer Yosippon*, might have seemed insufficient. Menasseh was careful to cite *Yosippon*, when he did cite it, as a text distinct from Flavius Josephus's work.⁵⁷ Even so, mere philological snobbery does not seem an entirely satisfactory answer.

Perhaps a clue to Menasseh's motivations can be found in the other work of Josephus he claimed to have translated, the pseudonymous 'Monarchia rationis'. There are several notable things about Menasseh's choice of this text along with *Against Apion*. The first is the title. This short work, usually called 4 Maccabees, is now generally agreed to have been written by a well-educated Hellenistic Jew sometime in the first or second century CE. Both Eusebius and Jerome, however, attributed it to Josephus, as did many of the manuscript and early printed traditions.⁵⁸ It is titled in the 1611 edition Menasseh used: *Eis tous Makkabaiouos logos. ē peri Autokratoros logismou* ('Argument on the Maccabees, or On the sole rule of reason'). Menasseh's title for the work, 'Monarchia rationis' (Monarchy of reason), is – as far as can be determined – his own translation (the standard Latin title, appearing also in the 1611 edition owned by Menasseh, is *De imperio rationis*).

4 Maccabees is a highly rhetorical, philosophically inflected account of the martyrdom of a mother and her seven sons (borrowed from a similar account in 2 Maccabees). Using the Stoic/Platonic language of reason's control over the passions (it calls itself a 'most philosophical account', 1:1), the text argues that traditional observance of the Torah and its ordinances 'rationally' prepare one for mastery over virtue and passion, and thus for a life of wisdom (1:15–30). The text is remarkable both for its eloquent, highly wrought account of martyrdom and for its insistence that the reason which allows the martyrs to bear their torture is 'the reason of piety' or 'pious reason' (ὁ τῆς εὐσεβείας λογισμός, e.g., 8:1; ὁ εὐσεβῆς λογισμός, e.g., 1:1), i.e., the law set forth by ancestral commandments (αἱ πάτριαι ἐντολαί, 9:1). This text will have been uniquely attractive to someone in Menasseh's position, despite it having had almost no

57 E.g., in *Vindiciae Judaeorum*, 128.

58 Eusebius, *History* 3.10.6; Jerome, *De vir. ill.* 13. For evidence and arguments about the authorship of 4 Maccabees, see David A. deSilva, *4 Maccabees: Introduction and Commentary on the Greek Text in Codex Sinaiticus* (Leiden, 2006), xi–xiv.

traceable influence in the Jewish tradition to this point.⁵⁹ In fact, there is some evidence of a privileged place for the Maccabee myth among the *conversos*. Raised and educated with texts beyond the traditional Jewish canon, secret Judaizers found in these heroes of Jewish history figures for emulation.⁶⁰ The intellectuals who emerged from among the *ex-conversos* naturally valued the exemplars of virtue presented by the Maccabees, and particularly the philosophically minded exhortations of that ‘learned and elegant book of Josephus, called the “Rule of Reason”’.⁶¹

The *conversos* and *ex-conversos* had constant cause to consider the question of martyrdom, and more than a few reasons to compare their plight to that of the Maccabees. The mid-seventeenth century witnessed the prosecution of the Inquisition with renewed fury, both on the Iberian peninsula and in the New World. As has been stressed by recent scholarship, there was considerable disagreement within the Spanish-Portuguese community over the status, significance, and sanctity of such martyrs.⁶² As a result, the Sephardim produced no martyrological chronicles of the sort that Jewish communities in Europe had after the Crusades.⁶³ One of the only published treatments of these contemporary martyrdoms was the thirtieth section of *The Hope of Israel*. There, Menasseh describes and praises the deaths of four victims of ‘that horrible monster’, the Inquisition, who ‘for the sanctifying of God’s name, have been burnt alive’.⁶⁴ This is evidence that Menasseh was at least somewhat outspoken in his public association of *converso* martyrs with political and philosophical virtue.⁶⁵

Another reason for the text’s appropriateness for educated Sephardim is the unabashedly Hellenic understanding of what is ‘philosophical’ as what can be assimilated to the command of reason (although he demonstrated no particularly systemic philosophical inclinations, Menasseh was well read

59 DeSilva, *4 Maccabees*, xxxi.

60 There are at least two epic poems devoted to the Maccabees written by New Christians, including Miguel de Silveira’s lauded *El Macabeo, poema heroico* (Naples, 1638).

61 Thus Isaac Cardoso in his treatment of martyrdom, *Excelencias*, 323.

62 See Miriam Bodian, *Dying in the Law of Moses: Crypto-Jewish Martyrdom in the Iberian World* (Bloomington, 2007).

63 Ibid., 188. Interestingly, *Yosippon* has long been recognized as a source for these medieval Ashkenazic chronicles of persecution; see Yitzhak Baer, *Studies in the History of the Jewish People* (Jerusalem, 1985), vol. 2, 101–27. Menasseh’s reliance on Josephus rather than *Yosippon* (which he also occasionally cited) highlights the different positions of these texts in their respective communities.

64 Menasseh ben Israel, *The Hope of Israel*, 47.

65 Menasseh’s description was a major source for Cardoso. See Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*, 395–98.

enough to cite Lipsius, among other voices of the contemporary revival of Hellenistic philosophy).⁶⁶ Once again, the claims on identity that Hellenistic Judaism experienced, and tried to assimilate, map on to the concerns, anxieties, and interests most relevant to the educated members of the 'nation'. As for Josephus's *Against Apion*, Menasseh's writings from the publication of *The Hope of Israel* (1650) through the end of his mission to England (1656) are increasingly concerned with apologetics – refuting the calumnies of anti-Semites for the betterment of his people. Drawing together arguments for the 'profitability' and 'faithfulness' of the Jews and combining them with others against the old charges of usury, blood libel, and proselytizing, Menasseh developed an apologetic style not dissimilar from Josephus's own in the second part of *Against Apion*; combining arguments against the internal logic of antisemitic libels with a keen consciousness of the cultural politics of his audience (in Menasseh's case, Protestant disgust at the Inquisition and the cruel excesses of 'the Papists').

Even if Menasseh's choice of texts makes sense, we have not solved the puzzle of language and audience. If these translations were meant specifically to respond to the crises of the contemporary 'nation', then the choice of Hebrew is exceedingly odd, given the low level of Hebrew literacy among the recently judaized.⁶⁷ Additionally, it is not clear what the general Jewish audience had to gain from a new translation of *Against Apion*, even a more exact one, *cum notis*. Yerushalmi makes the point that the translation of Jewish material into vernacular languages was a necessity for educating newly observant *ex-conversos*, while translating secular, Western texts into Hebrew became a hallmark of the early Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah).⁶⁸ Menasseh's translation of Greek texts, written by a Jew, largely 'orthodox' in content, yet long absent from Jewish shelves, confounds these dichotomies and falls, perhaps, somewhere in between the two paradigms. I would cautiously submit that we should look beyond Menasseh's immediate surroundings to find his audience. Menasseh was very careful in choosing which language to use. Those works he hoped would have an effect on his community, he wrote in Portuguese or Spanish. Those he expected would have a scholarly impact, he wrote in Latin.⁶⁹ Even his letters varied depending on the recipient and

66 For the more formally trained Orobio de Castro's affinity for neo-sceptical thought (which had deep roots among the *ex-conversos*), see Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism*, 319–22.

67 See Renée Levine Melammed, *A Question of Identity: Iberian Conversos in Historical Perspective* (Oxford, 2004), 154.

68 Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*, 48.

69 Examples of the former include the *Ordenes* of the fasts (*Orden de los cinco Tahanioth*, Amsterdam, 1630) and the holidays (*Orden de los Mahamadoth*, Amsterdam, 1631).

the purpose. It seems likely that a translation of Josephus was meant not to resonate within the Western Sephardic community that already valued him so highly, but to re-introduce this pious, yet learned Jewish voice into the literary conversation of mainstream Judaism.

Menasseh had seen in England just how virulent (and vivid) the old antisemitic tropes could be (some of them dating back to Josephus's own time). He had also seen how difficult it was to come to terms with the Inquisition and its victims. Perhaps he thought what he took to be Josephus's answers to these problems might find willing readers beyond the already 'Josephist' confines of the Netherlands and the 'nation'. Perhaps he merely saw fit to make these relevant texts available to posterity in the 'eternal language', but in such a way that showed the modern Jews to be no less sophisticated than the Hellenistic forebears they were reclaiming.⁷⁰ This then, was the 'Josephan' moment in early modern Jewish life. Thanks to a critical mass of classically educated Jews, and the revolution in scholarship that made the texts of Hellenistic Judaism available outside the context of Church history, Jews were once again reading, translating, and as we have seen, taking pride in their prodigal historian.⁷¹

4 Pharisees, Heresies, and Spinoza's Anti-Apologetics

Thus far we have focused on the general trend in Western Sephardic readings of Josephus in the seventeenth century. This period, however, was one in which the countercurrents and crises in Jewish thought were often as important as what went on in the mainstream.⁷² This is certainly the case in the reception of Josephus, where rather than using Josephus to explain and defend normative Judaism, two members of the Amsterdam *kahal*, Uriel da Costa and Baruch de Spinoza, engaged with Josephus for very different ends.

Uriel da Costa is often portrayed as a predecessor and precursor of Spinoza, though the two belong to different generations and took markedly different

Examples of the latter include the Latin edition of the *Conciliador* (Amsterdam, 1633) and *De Creatione Problemata Triginta* (Amsterdam, 1636).

70 One is reminded of Agnon's comment about Heine: 'He has been beautifully translated into Hebrew and his survival is assured.' (Saul Bellow, 'A Jewish Writer in America', *The New York Review of Books*, 27 October 2011.)

71 Josephus's *Life*, interestingly enough, is neither discussed nor cited in any of the works discussed above that touch on or cite Josephus, except in Menasseh's letter, where he notes that Josephus was ostracized by his fellows. If these Jewish readers of Josephus were troubled by any aspects of his life story, they did not dwell on it.

72 For the general theme of crisis in early modern Jewish history, see David Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton, 2010).

approaches to their respective forms of heterodoxy. Da Costa's major polemical work, the *Examination of Pharisaic Traditions*, is a sort of mirror text to the works written by other *ex-conversos* discussed above – instead of calling on his intellectual resources and familiarity with Josephus to defend the rabbinic tradition, he uses them to call it into question.⁷³ The crucial role that Josephus played in da Costa's critique of rabbinic Judaism is clear right from the appearance of the word 'Pharisee' in the book's title. In a parallel with the more orthodox figures treated above, da Costa was clearly fascinated by the insights Josephus provided into Hellenistic Jewish life. He did not deduce from this any lessons about the political supremacy of communal leadership. Rather, like his Christian Hebraist contemporaries Drusius, Serrarius, and Scaliger, da Costa was fascinated by the idea that Hellenistic Judaism had been divided into several combative sects.⁷⁴ He identified rabbinic Judaism with one such sect, the Pharisees.

The opening of the *Examination* begins with the rejection of the claim that the Pharisees have any claim to a 'true' tradition traceable to the divine revelation. Da Costa wishes to identify with another sect, the Sadducees, whom he calls (paraphrasing and expanding on *Antiquities* 18.16–17) 'a minority comprising the most important, learned, and noble part of the people'.⁷⁵ In the most contentious part of the treatise, the arguments concerning the immortality of the soul, da Costa relies heavily on Josephus for his argument that belief in the immortality of the soul is not native to the Torah, but a devious invention of the Pharisees.⁷⁶ Da Costa did not only use Josephus for the history, character, and beliefs of the sects – he also used him to catch the 'Pharisees' out in errors of chronology.⁷⁷ Josephus is, for da Costa, the impartial observer who can vindicate him against his Rabbanite opponents.

It might be natural to assume that the other great heretical figure in the history of the Amsterdam Sephardim took a similar approach. There is no

73 For the life of da Costa, see Uriel da Costa, *Examination of Pharisaic traditions = Exame das tradições phariseas: facsimile of the unique copy in the Royal Library of Copenhagen*, ed. and trans. Herman Prins Salomon and Isaac S. D. Sassoon (Leiden, 1993), 'Introduction', and also the reprinted autobiography *Exemplar Humanae Vitae* in the same volume, 556–66.

74 For Christian Hebraist fascination with Josephus's account of the sects, see Francis Schmidt, 'The Hasideans and the Ancient Jewish "Sects": A Seventeenth-Century Controversy', in *Sects and Sectarianism in Jewish History*, ed. Sacha Stern (Leiden, 2011), 187–204.

75 Da Costa, *Exemplar*, 9 (274). (References will be to the page in the printed facsimile of the *Exemplar*, followed by the page of the translation.)

76 *Ibid.*, 49–53 (345–47).

77 *Ibid.*, 10 (275).

doubt that Spinoza is of the same general intellectual background as most of the figures discussed above. He was, in all probability, a student of Menasseh ben Israel at *Talmud Tora*.⁷⁸ His library contained many works that testify to this shared *habitus*, including copies of Menasseh's *The Hope of Israel*, Quevedo's translation of Phocylides, and the old Latin translation of Josephus's *Opera*.⁷⁹ It seems logical that he might follow da Costa's lead in critiquing the communal traditions. Indeed, Spinoza uses 'Pharisee' much in the same way his predecessor did – as a perfect synonym for rabbinic Judaism (though he adopts perhaps a less venomous tone than da Costa).⁸⁰ Spinoza also directly cites Josephus for some of the same reasons as da Costa, including questioning biblical chronologies⁸¹ and exploring the origins of the 'deluded Pharisees'.⁸² More versed in rabbinic literature and Hebrew philology than da Costa was, Spinoza can also use Josephus to point out textual problems and discrepancies throughout the Bible.⁸³ Da Costa seemed to view Josephus much as the other *ex-converso* writers did – as an authoritative source that could provide conclusive evidence against opposing positions. Spinoza, the first textual critic to apply a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' to biblical authority in a systematic way,⁸⁴ is no less suspicious of the historical authority of Josephus himself.

When there is adequate information about the author (and Josephus gives us the rudiments of such information in his *Life*), Spinoza says the reader needs to do nothing else but attempt to interpret 'what the author could have had in mind, or if you will (*vel*) what the period and context demanded'.⁸⁵ Josephus was a self-admitted Pharisee (*Life* 12). He is, Spinoza knew, no disinterested observer writing about the Jews *sine ira et studio*. Spinoza, writing almost fifty years after da Costa, was witness to the way in which Josephus had been

78 Steven M. Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge, 1999), 78, 80.

79 See Jakob Freudenthal, *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinozas*, ed. Manfred Walther with Michael Czelinski (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 2006), vol. 1, 120–200; for the edition of Josephus found there see Omero Proietti, *La Città Divisa: Flavio Giuseppe, Spinoza e i farisei* (Rome, 2003), 35–45. For Spinoza's intellectual background, the literature is endless but see Nadler, *Spinoza*, with bibliography.

80 See Nathan Porges, 'Das Wort Pharisäer bei Spinoza', *MGWJ* 61 (1917): 150–65.

81 E.g., Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in idem, *Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg, 1925), vol. 3, IX.7, 132 (references will be to chapter, section and page, with translations from Baruch de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne [Cambridge, 2007]).

82 *Ibid.*, XVIII.4, 223.

83 E.g., *ibid.* IX.9, 133 (on the length of Saul's reign), X.6, 143 (on contradictions in Ezekiel), and X.11, 146 (on the dating and authorship of Ezra and Nehemiah).

84 See, e.g., J. Samuel Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (Cambridge, 2001).

85 Spinoza, *Tractatus*, VII.15, 110, translation emended.

taken up and adopted by both the contemporary 'Pharisees' (Rabbanite) and other political and religious interests (e.g., the Christian Hebraists). At several important points, he puts these contemporary readings of Josephus squarely in his crosshairs.⁸⁶ The fact that at least some strains in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* are directed towards contemporary Jewish opinion is well known (the work may even have had its origins in Spinoza's unpublished *Apología para justificarse de su abdicación de la sinagoga*).⁸⁷ Certainly Menasseh ben Israel, author of the *Conciliador* and self-described 'Pharisee',⁸⁸ is one clear target of Spinoza's book, which aims to show 'that numerous ambiguities are inevitable [in the Bible] and that no method will resolve them all'.⁸⁹ But in at least three important cases, the argument seems to be directed at precisely those junctures where Josephus was most important for the Jews of the *converso* 'nation'.

The most obvious of these moments is the 'Hebrew Republic' section of the *Tractatus* (books XVII and XVIII). First and foremost, this is a rejection of the 'Hebrew Republic' genre so popular among liberal (Remonstrant) writers in the Netherlands.⁹⁰ In light of the current study, however, we are in a position to identify a secondary target – the forms of thinking about Jewish politics that focused on communal stability and ritual, and which went hand in hand with the Jewish revival of interest in Josephus. To arguments for the sovereignty of the religious community, which dated back to Isaac Abravanel, Spinoza responds that Jewish 'election and vocation ... lay only in the success and the prosperity at that time of their commonwealth'; and 'nothing more could be promised to the society of the Hebrews in return for their constant observance of the laws than security of life and its advantages'.⁹¹ Spinoza calls this form of political organization where 'anyone who defected from this

86 It is necessary briefly to acknowledge the first work that both identifies an affinity between *ex-converso* writers and Josephus and highlights the importance of Josephus for Spinoza's arguments in particular. Proietti's *La Città Divisa* argues that there is an essential 'concordanza' between Josephus's rewriting of sacred history and Spinoza's critique of the same. His evidence for this leans heavily on Momigliano's interpretation of *Against Apion*, which is contentious to say the least; see Arnaldo Momigliano, 'An Apology of Judaism: The *Against Apion* by Flavius Josephus', in *Essays on Ancient and Modern Judaism*, ed. Silvia Berti (Chicago, 1994), 58–66. There is no room to discuss here why it makes more sense to say Josephus is on the side of the early modern 'orthodox' rather than on the side of the radical critics, but I refer the reader to my 'A Reappraisal of *Contra Apionem* 2.145 as an Original Contribution to Political Thought', *Scripta Classica Israelica* 32 (2013): 153–73.

87 Nadler, *Spinoza*, 132.

88 Menasseh ben Israel, *De termino vitae* (Amsterdam, 1639), 9.

89 Spinoza, *Tractatus*, IX.14, 109. See Proietti, *La Città Divisa*, ch. 6.

90 On Spinoza's response to the 'political Hebraist' reading of Josephus, see Abolafia, 'Spinoza, Josephus'.

91 Spinoza, *Tractatus*, III.6, 48.

religion ceased to be a citizen' *theocracy*,⁹² the very word coined by Josephus in *Against Apion* to describe the rule of god over the Jewish people by means of the commandments.⁹³ Spinoza's definition of theocracy is almost the precise opposite of Josephus's. For Josephus, 'even if we [Jews] are deprived of wealth, cities, and other good things, at least the law endures for us immortal'.⁹⁴ This is completely consonant with the attitudes of the Sephardic thinkers discussed above. Spinoza, however, insists that 'Hebrew citizens ... could live well only within their own land; outside of it there was nothing [for them] but loss and shame'.⁹⁵ If the *ex-converso* writers want to give their 'nation' and its communal organizations the weight of a polity, Spinoza insists that only a sovereign state would restore meaning to the idea of 'Jewish' political life. Menasseh, Orobio de Castro, and indeed Josephus himself all try to legitimate the idea of communal (ritual) life as equal in importance to sovereign politics. Spinoza ruthlessly rejects any form of politics without true sovereignty (*imperium*). The form of coercion practised by religious communities merely apes the power of the sovereign, without exhibiting the contractual exchange of rights that can be rationally deduced in the case of the state. If the Jewish community wishes to have coercive power, it should get itself a state.

Spinoza's 'anti-Josephism' is also in evidence in his discussion of the significance of martyrdom, a point where he sharpens the distinction between communal politics and state sovereignty. 'What if the sovereign commands something which is against religion and the obedience which we have promised to god by an explicit agreement?', Spinoza asks, and then claims that 'the supreme right of deciding about religion belongs to the sovereign power, whatever judgment he may make'.⁹⁶ This is an extraordinary position for the child of *converso* parents to take. If the government is deemed legitimate (that is, along Hobbesian lines, a person is not in a state of open rebellion against it), a person 'must obey ... or be compelled to do so'.⁹⁷ With serene equanimity, Spinoza dismisses the plight of the Iberian martyrs. To sharpen the point, he notes that some forms of martyrdom are reasonable, such as that of Eleazar (the protagonist of *De imperio rationis* [4 Maccabees]). Because Eleazar's act of martyrdom was political, and performed in the service of a state that was

92 Ibid., XVII.8, 206.

93 CA 2.165.

94 CA 2.277. Barclay's translation, with emendations.

95 Spinoza, *Tractatus*, XVII.25, 216.

96 Ibid., XVI.21, 199.

97 Ibid., XVI.22, 200.

'more or less independent', he was exercising right and power well.⁹⁸ Spinoza is severing the example of the Maccabean martyrs from any contemporary relevance. This is a point connected to the question of Jewish well-being. Jewish suffering, Spinoza argues, only makes sense when in the service of a Jewish state.

A final and equally powerful instance of Spinoza's attention to the 'Josephan' arguments current among Jews comes in his analysis of the end of the Hebrew Republic. The most comprehensive account of the decline and fall of the 'second commonwealth' is, of course, Josephus's *Jewish War*. Spinoza is clearly familiar with the work and makes use of it in describing the social origins of the various sects. Yet, the source he chooses when describing the fall of Jerusalem is none other than the Roman historian Tacitus, a noted ancient anti-Semite. The final siege of Jerusalem was difficult, Tacitus writes, 'more because of the character of the nation (*ingenium gentis*) and the obstinacy of their superstition' than because of the military situation.⁹⁹ Spinoza picked a quote that highlighted Tacitean disdain for the Jewish *superstitio*. That this exchange of Josephus for Tacitus is the precise rhetorical opposite of the one made by Isaac Cardoso in *Las Excelencias* is hardly coincidental.¹⁰⁰ Spinoza is at pains to show that the end of the Jewish state was foreordained by the very structure of the state, that is to say, by the very structure of the religion itself: 'The truth is that had God wished their state to last longer, He would have organized their rights and laws differently and instituted a different form of state.'¹⁰¹ This is ultimate anti-'Josephan' move – to deny the legitimacy of separating Judaism as a religion from the political fate of the Jews. The failure of the latter points to the weakness of the former. In his painstaking Tacitean way, Spinoza is writing anti-apologetics.

98 Ibid. While Eleazar is a central character and rhetorical focus of *De imperio rationis* (4 Maccabees), his story also appears in 2 Maccabees, so the reference is not entirely clear.

99 Tacitus, *Histories* 2.4. Spinoza adopts a variant reading of Lipsius: *ingenium gentis* for *ingenium montis*. See Proietti, *La Città Divisa*, 156–62, although his interpretation is rather overly ingenious. See also René Bloch, 'Tacitus' Excursus on the Jews through the Ages', in *Oxford Readings in Tacitus*, ed. Rhiannon Ash (Oxford, 2012), 377–409 (392, n. 64).

100 Cf. Cardoso, *Excelencias*, 333–34.

101 Spinoza, *Tractatus*, XVII.26, 217. It is true, as Proietti notes, that Spinoza is very positive about several aspects of the 'state', but on the whole, he agrees with Tacitus (otherwise, his emendation of Tacitus's text would make very little sense). For a more detailed explanation of Spinoza's opinion on the constitution of the Hebrew Republic, see Abolafia, 'Spinoza, Josephus'.

5 Conclusion: towards Enlightenment Apologetics

It was not, in all probability, Spinoza's systematic refutation of the 'Josephan' picture of Jewish politics that ended the renewal of interest in Josephus among Jews, or, rather, it was not Spinoza alone. With the end of the seventeenth century, the fury of the Inquisition began to wane, and the tide of *conversos* fleeing to Amsterdam and the other centres of Sephardic life began to ebb. The second generation of *ex-conversos*, those born into fully functioning (and insular) Jewish communities, did not have the same level of urbanity and secular knowledge as their fathers had. Although they still spoke Portuguese, none attended university – their worldliness was the worldliness of the Dutch trader or the Venetian merchant. The delicate intellectual conditions for Jewish interest in Josephus were no longer extant.

In addition, Spinoza's critical and philologically demanding approach to the authorship and authority of the biblical text, along with his uncompromising philosophical explanation of the divine-as-nature, had completely changed the possibilities of Jewish apologetics. The idea of the Mosaic Law as a direct political blueprint begins to look ridiculous against the background of Hobbesian assumptions about reason, authority, and power. Jewish apologists of the Enlightenment such as Moses Mendelssohn could quote Menasseh for his refutation of particular antisemitic libels (indeed, Mendelssohn wrote a preface for the translation of the *Vindiciae* into German, assuring Menasseh's reputation in the Jewish Enlightenment),¹⁰² but they could not share his faith in the authority and perfection of the Bible, or, indeed, in the authority and usefulness of Josephus. In contrast to da Costa's use of Josephus, which attacked normative Judaism while maintaining some respect for the historian, Spinoza stripped the halo of sacred history once and for all.

With the dawn of the Enlightenment, the main assaults on Jewish life and practice came not in the form of the traditional accusations passed down from antiquity through the Middle Ages, accusations which could be treated as collection of contestable facts (and against which, as we have seen, Josephus could be a useful ally). Spinoza's unrelenting critique inaugurated an era of anti-Jewish polemics under the aspect of the universal, the rational, and the cosmopolitan. At the end of this study, we can only gesture at the outlines of that future debate, one where Spinoza is a chief witness for the prosecution, and the explanations and rationalizations of Josephus are of no use at all.

¹⁰² Menasseh ben Israel, *Rettung der Juden* [a]us dem Englischen übersetzt. [n]ebst einer Vorrede von Moses Mendelsohn (Stettin; Berlin, 1782).

Perhaps the best illustration of this development can be found in the work of Mendelssohn, the greatest Jewish apologist in the age of Enlightenment. Much like Menasseh ben Israel or Isaac Cardoso, Mendelssohn was a sort of lightning rod for non-Jewish intellectuals wishing to engage with Judaism. His exchanges with Christian polemicists touched on some of the same questions popular in the previous century – from the reliability of reports of the historical Jesus¹⁰³ to the faithfulness of the Jews to the countries they inhabited.¹⁰⁴ Yet the tenor of the arguments Mendelssohn faced was entirely novel – as can be seen in one response to Mendelssohn's preface to the *Vindiciae*. August Adolf von Hennings, Enlightenment publicist and sometime politician, makes a point of dismissing all claims to the historical value of Judaism as cited from Josephus in Menasseh's work, but this rejection of the Jewish historian's account comes not out of any love for Christian sacred history:¹⁰⁵

And why do we need Judaism and Christianity? We have teachings, common to all religions, and which right reason ('gesunde Vernunft') must recognize in all places. The more we spread these reasons ('Gründe') and teachings, the more securely we establish toleration, which without this *general* enlightenment ('*allgemeine Aufklärung*') is ever in danger of being infected by the poison of partiality and demonstrating folly rather than truth.¹⁰⁶

Josephus can offer only particular defences of Jewish custom. According to the prevailing Enlightenment discourse, reason demands universal arguments. Mendelssohn, whose deep and abiding engagement with Spinoza is well known, himself admitted: 'I thank God every day that He did not make my eternal happiness dependent upon exegetical inquiries.'¹⁰⁷ Mendelssohn thus implicitly agrees with his non-Jewish interlocutors that enlightenment, and indeed salvation itself, must emerge from 'general' concepts. In this, they all

103 The most famous example of such an exchange, among many, was Mendelssohn's debate with the Swiss Pietist Johann Caspar Lavater. See Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (Philadelphia, 1973), 201–42.

104 See Mendelssohn's role in the publication of Christian Wilhelm Dohm's decisive argument for Jewish emancipation. Altmann, *Mendelssohn*, 449–61.

105 Altmann, *Mendelssohn*, 491.

106 Published in 'Briefe von, an und über Mendelssohn', ed. Ludwig Geiger and R. M. Werner, *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland* 1 (1887): 109–35 (121).

107 See Moses Mendelssohn, 'Gegenbetrachtungen über Bonnets Palingenesie', in *Gesammelte Schriften: Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Alexander Altmann et. al. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1971ff.), vol. 7, 95. For Mendelssohn and Spinoza, see Daniel B. Schwartz, *The First Modern Jew: Spinoza and the History of an Image* (Princeton, 2012), 35–52.

inhabit the world of Spinoza, who was 'utterly amazed that men should want to subject reason, the greatest gift and the divine light, to ancient words which may well have been adulterated with malicious intent'.¹⁰⁸ Mendelssohn may fundamentally agree with Josephus that Jewish communal law is not contrary to the command of reason, but he must delimit this as an 'imperfect' moral obligation for a specific community, secondary to the 'perfect' rationality, *sub specie aeternitatis*, of the Spinozan system.¹⁰⁹ After Spinoza's critique, Mendelssohn could not have direct recourse to Josephus as source and did not imitate the style of Josephus's arguments, as earlier Jewish writers might have done.

We may begin to understand why the intellectual world birthed by Spinoza might have been less than favourable to 'Josephan' arguments about communal political life or 'Josephan' evidence for the utility and dignity of Judaism. But while the political rationalism of the Enlightenment may have foreclosed some uses of Josephus, the general debate between a view of politics that looks to privilege communal semi-sovereignty and a rationalistic political universalism remains far from decided today. As far as political thought – particularly Jewish political thought – is concerned, both the communitarian particularism of the 'Josephans' and the strident rationalism of Spinoza still have something to say.

108 Spinoza, *Tractatus*, xv.3, 182; cf. xv.10, 188.

109 See Nelson, 'From Selden to Mendelssohn', 113–14.