

Alfred Edersheim - Another 19th century “Jewish” Observation of Josephus?

Abstract

In this article I will discuss the perception of Josephus through the lens of the theologian-historian Alfred Edersheim (1825-1889). Edersheim, a Christian Presbyterian and a convert from Judaism, wrote several books, especially on Jewish and Christian 1st Century history. Edersheim’s view of Josephus can be defined as negative and throughout his writings he labels Josephus as a traitor. This view converges with the perception of the most prominent Jewish historian of the 19th century, Heinrich (הַיִּצְחָק) Graetz . The views of both historians meet in their animosity towards Josephus. As will be argued, it is not because Edersheim cherished some elements of his previous Jewish faith, but mainly since they shared a mutual antagonism towards Roman domination. In their eyes, the Empire was responsible for the havocs that were wrought upon Judea in the first century AD. For Graetz, Josephus's betrayal assisted the Romans in destroying Judea and the temple. For Edersheim, the betrayal was twofold – by commission and omission: against the Jews but as well against Christianity, against the first by commission and against the latter by omission. The former betrayal can be seen in the Jewish War as portrayed by Josephus. The latter is observed in the fact that Josephus hardly described the most significant development of the first century AD, the rise of Christianity, and by that he “betrayed” his role as an objective historian.

It may seem rather peculiar that for a workshop on the Jewish reception of Josephus I choose to concentrate on the writings of the Christian writer, Alfred Edersheim (1825-1889). However, as I intend to show, in his reception of Josephus, Edersheim’s opinion resembles the prevailing opinion of the leading Jewish historian, Heinrich (הַיִּצְחָק) Graetz (1817-1891). Edersheim was born to a high middle class Jewish family in Vienna. After leaving his studies at the local university due to a sudden financial crisis, he converted to Christianity. Then, he moved to Pesth in Hungary where he was influenced by the teaching of the Scottish Presbyterian, Duncan Smith. He, then, converted to Calvinism and moved to Scotland. From this stage on, he remained in the

British Isles for the rest of his life, working as a preacher in several communities and even teaching theology at Oxford university for several years (at the end of the 1880's).

In his books on Christianity and Judaism Edersheim leaned on his own early knowledge of Judaism and on his acquired Christian learning. These included his most famous work about *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*¹. In addition to this, he also wrote the history of Israel from the time of the destruction of the Temple by Titus and another book about the temple in the time of Christ. As can be seen from these subjects, the first century AD encompasses a major part of his studies, especially because, as a devoted Christian and a former Jew, two critical events were meaningful for him: the birth of Jesus and the destruction of the Temple. The Christian argument that linked between the Jewish refusal to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and the destruction of the temple were linked by Edersheim time and again: "*The misunderstandings of the Jews reached their climax in the national rejection of the Saviour, and after this the downfall of Jerusalem was not long delayed*"². These formative events were, of course, related in the famous prophecy of Jesus himself, who upon visiting the temple in Jerusalem and observing the sinful conduct surrounding it, declared: "*There shall not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down*". (Matt. 24: 2 // Mk. 13: 1-4 // Lk 21: 5-6).

As I will indicate later, it is not necessarily Edersheim's Jewish past that brought him closer to Graetz, but their common anti-Roman attitudes. Graetz, who is known for his *Geschichte der Juden*³, depicts the ill-conduct of Josephus and his sympathy or bias towards Rome. The origin of this attitude is found prior to the war when Josephus spent several years in Rome and became a devout admirer of the Roman culture ("*Josephus war von diesem Augenblicke an ein Anbeter des Römertums*"⁴). Graetz comments on how Josephus, after returning to Judea, probably mocked the zealots attempts to free Judea from Roman control (*Wie*

mußte er über das Gebahren der wütenden Zeloten lachen, die von nichts Anderem träumten, als davon, die Römer aus Judäa zu werfen!"⁵). He adds that Josephus advocated against the war with the Romans and tried to rebut the misplaced conviction that a victory was within reach. Yet, after the defeat of Celsus, Josephus joined the war and was even nominated commander of the Galilee. Graetz, in response to this nomination, asks how it was possible that this "Roman" Josephus was elevated to this position. (*Woher es kam, daß dieser Römling Josephus...*⁶). Graetz also adds that already from the early stage of the war, Josephus served the interests of King Agrippa who also favored Rome. The difference between Josephus's conduct and that of Johannes of Gischala (יוחנן מגוש חלב) is also emphasized by Graetz. Johannes is portrayed as a patriotic hero and as the complete opposite of Josephus: *"particularly repugnant to Josephus was John of Gischala ; his untiring energy and intellectual superiority were enough to awaken the jealousy of the former"*⁷ (translated into English). Furthermore, Graetz writes that while Josephus's forces crumbled before the legions of Vespasian, had the followers of John of Gischala confronted the Romans in battle, a different, less destructive result would have been possible⁸. The conduct and the stature of the leader were, therefore, crucial for the success of the anti-Roman campaign, but the leadership was given to the wrong individual, one who Graetz claims: *"... would gladly have gone over to the enemy, but some remote feeling of shame prevented him from taking this unpardonable step at the beginning of the war"*⁹.

From these last statements it seems that Graetz implies that Josephus betrayed the Jewish cause as the commander of the Galilee. However, after reading closely the original text of Graetz, I tend to think that one should reach a different conclusion. Josephus, despite his Roman leaning, only crossed the lines after the defeat in Iotapata (יודפת). Although Graetz holds Josephus responsible for the end-result, he maintains that in this early stage of the war it was the

incompetence of Josephus that failed him and not an intentional treachery (“*Unglücklicherweise war Josephus nicht der mann, eine so reisige Ausgabe glücklich zu lösen, und er trug durch sein Benehmen zum untergange des judaisten staates wesentlich bei*”¹⁰).

Nevertheless, when reading the 19th century Hebrew translation of Graetz by Pinhas Rabinovitch, one can determine that according to the first, already in this early phase of the revolt Josephus betrayed the Jews. It should be emphasized that this notion does not appear in the other English or Hebrew (Citroen) translations but only in the account of Rabinovitch. In several instances Rabinovitch attaches his own substantial additions to the original text of Graetz. For example, upon receiving the command of the Galilee he writes about Josephus:” אף לאסון הלאום הישראלי לא היה נגיד הגליל יוסף בן מתתיהו לא איש אמונים לעמו ולא גבור משכיל לכלכל דברי מלחמה”¹¹. Josephus, therefore, acted deliberately and betrayed his people already when he was in charge of the war in the Galilee. Later, Rabinovitch adds another similar comment that does not appear in the original text: לבו וידו לא היו אמונים לעמו ובמעשיו קרב קץ החסן הלאומי ועזר לרעה להאביד ניר לבית יהודה¹² ולגדוע קרן ישראל. Despite this glaring difference between the original text and the translate one, the significant point is that Graetz also portrays Josephus in a very negative light. Perhaps, according to Graetz, he did not betray his people while he was the leader of the Galilean revolt, but he unquestionably acted contrary to the Jewish interest of those times. By this, Graetz, as the prominent 19th century Jewish historian, actually paves the way for the ruling negative historiographical perception of Josephus.

This negative view of Josephus was not only typical of Jewish historians but was also prevalent in the writings of Christian writers. Edersheim himself affirms this: “*Few characters in Jewish history have provoked such unanimous condemnation, alike by Jews and Christians, with*

perhaps the solitary exception of the latest Jewish writer on the subject"¹³. The Jewish writer he refers to is Rabbi Jacob Hamburger (1826-1911), who in his *Real-Encyklopadie für Bibel und Talmud*, vindicates Josephus and claims that the latter redeemed his former deeds by advocating for Judaism and by protecting Jews from anti-Semitic accusations¹⁴. However, as Edersheim notes, this view is unique and most writers depict Josephus as a traitor.

The question is why this negative view is common to both Christian and Jewish writers and in particular to Edersheim. The condemnation of the Jews is perhaps understandable because from a rather objective outlook the acts of Josephus may seem problematic¹⁵. Nevertheless, one must ask why Edersheim joins them? What is the source of his antagonism? Is there any specific explanation at all or maybe Edersheim just follows a common anti-Josephus climate of opinion that is dominant among his predecessors and contemporaries in the 19th century? One may assume that since Edersheim converted and especially because of the prominent role of the church in preserving the writings of Josephus throughout the ages, that he would portray Josephus in a more positive way, i.e. that Josephus would not be regarded as a traitor but as a unique individual who had foreseen the oncoming disasters that awaited the Jews. In addition, Edersheim, after all, could identify with Josephus on the subjective level. The former, as a Christian convert, was perhaps in a similar situation, since he also "left" his people and might also be regarded as a renegade.

However, from Edersheim's books a different conclusion arises and none of the above speculations are evident. In all of his books, and especially in the *History of the Jews* and in his entry on "Josephus" in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, Josephus is regularly described in unfavorable words. As Edersheim writes: "*If Josephus was not from the first a traitor, his conduct, at least, appears sufficiently treasonable, and seems to have early roused the suspicions*

*of his colleagues*¹⁶. This is a slightly different and a more restrained statement than the allegation by Rabinovitch. Edersheim hints but does not conclude explicitly, that Josephus was a traitor already in his role as the commander of the Galilee. His betrayal was coupled with the betrayal of two other prominent Jewish individuals, King Agrippa and his sister Berenice “*who had more or less openly sided with the enemies of their nation*”¹⁷.

According to Edersheim, Josephus portrayed Rome in very favorable terms and at the same time criticized the Jews because he wished to justify his own reasons for backing the Roman cause. As the commander of the Galilee, being a very prominent figure in the Jewish rebellion, the importance of Josephus to the Romans was critical. His treason later symbolized the approaching Jewish defeat and had a crucial demoralizing effect on the Jews, in particular, because of the stature of Josephus that was very respected by his fellow countrymen. In addition, this position handed the Romans operational information, since Josephus must have possessed vast data and knowledge regarding the Jewish forces and society, especially about their plans of engagement in the war against the Romans¹⁸.

Despite this, Edersheim's description of Josephus is not all negative. In terms of his narrative itself, he follows Josephus faithfully and in most incidents does not challenge his account. He even endorses the statement of Josephus that Titus did not intend to burn the Temple (A very much debated issue among the scholars)¹⁹. In this case, it is also interesting to see how Edersheim refers to the Jewish sources in Gittin (ג'טין) which recounts the horrible punishments that were inflicted upon Titus as a result of the destruction. Titus, of course, is held as the main perpetrator of the destruction according to the Jewish sources, in contrast to the attempt of Josephus to vindicate him. Edersheim disregards the Talmudic stories and defines them as mere

fables. He, therefore, adopts the version of Josephus and trusts his testimony about his great effort to protect the temple²⁰.

Notwithstanding these examples, they do not revise the main conclusion of Edersheim that Josephus betrayed his own people. By this, he presents a very similar approach to Graetz's. Here I wish to propose a possible explanation for this similarity, which may derive from the religious tendencies of Edersheim, but especially due to his hatred of Rome.

Edersheim does respect Josephus as an important source for the period but still regards his contribution to the history of the early Church as much less significant. Already in the first footnote in the dictionary, Edersheim argues that even though Josephus was vital to the history of the Church - it is an exaggeration to claim that without him no history of the Church would exist. Furthermore, he also claims that the famous *Testimonium Flavianum* from *Antiquities* eighteen (3,3) is based on a later Christian interpolation. Therefore, one should not define it as an historical evidence²¹. Edersheim himself claims (in his footnote) that he ignored the evidence on Christ by Josephus in his book about the Jewish temple²². Nevertheless, in his opinion, the two other texts on James, the brother of Jesus, and John the Baptist, are authentic. According to him, until the 10th century, based mainly on these texts, Christian writers praised Josephus for his spiritual and historical importance and he was even adorned by St. Jerome as the “*Greek Livy*”²³.

However, Edersheim does not regard Josephus as being meaningful in any theological sense. This is not only due to the doubtful reliability of the *Testimonium*, but in relevance to all of his writings: *...in this, as in the other works of Josephus, we look in vain for any trace of proper appreciation of the spiritual elements in the history of Israel*”²⁴, while Philo, for

instance, represents a different example of a spiritual luminary. Edersheim argues that Josephus was only capable of understanding the rationalistic aspect of Philo but could not comprehend his mystical views²⁵. Another such comparison is made between Josephus and Paul: *“But what a contrast between these two men who were at the same time in Rome, each professing to be a true Israelite, and to love his people...”*²⁶.

The main reason for Edersheim’s criticism of Josephus derives from the fact that he “betrayed his role” as a historian since he hardly mentioned the most influential development of the century, the rise of Christianity. This “betrayal” is seen explicitly in Edersheim’s book *The life of Jesus* where he criticizes Josephus for ignoring the massacre of the infants by Herod:

*“Nor do we wonder that it remained unrecorded by Josephus, since on other occasions also he has omitted events which to us seem important... Besides, he had, perhaps, a special motive for this silence. Josephus always carefully suppresses, so far as possible, all that refers to the Christ probably not only in accordance with his own religious views, but because mention of a Christ might have been dangerous, certainly would have been inconvenient, in a work written by an intense self-seeker, mainly for readers in Rome”*²⁷.

In his opinion, a direct line connects the betrayal of Josephus during the war and his reluctance to describe the deeds of Christ. Furthermore, not only did Josephus ignore Christianity, but he also adopted an anti-Christian terminology. According to Edersheim, Josephus’s conduct was a combination of his own self-interest, the destructive Roman influence and especially his assessment that it was better to join the mighty Romans than to be their enemy.

Although Edersheim himself criticizes Graetz for despising Christianity and thus not following historical facts²⁸, their historical lessons still converge over the performance of Josephus. Each of them had his own point of departure. Graetz perceives him as a traitor who assisted the Romans and played a significant role in the exile of the Jews from their land. Edersheim despises him

mainly for ignoring Christianity. The conduct of Josephus as portrayed in the Jewish War supplied plenty of ammunition for both writers.

Nevertheless, the main problem that that is pertinent to all the historians who labeled Josephus as a traitor still remains. Our knowledge of Josephus derives mainly and almost exclusively from Josephus himself. Why would he describe himself as a traitor? What was his interest? Was it only his self-indulgence or fear of the Romans? It seems that the answer to this question is still bewildering, unless we adopt the approach that Josephus did not betray his people, but only supported the pragmatic and today's very esteemed approach of Rabi Johanan ben Zakai (רבי יוחנן בן זכאי).

¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol.1, (New-York, 1898).

² Alfred Edersheim, *History of the Jewish Nation After the Destruction of Jerusalem Under Titus*, (London, New-York and Bombay, 1896), P. 2

³ Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte Der Juden Vom Untergang Des Jüdischen Staates Bis Zum Abschluss Des Talmud*, 4e, Vermehrte, Und Verbesserte, Aufl., Bearb. von S. Horowitz. (Leipzig, 1908).

⁴ s.483

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, s.484.

⁷ Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1893), p. 279.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.285.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.286.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.482

¹¹ צבי גראטץ, ספר דברי ימי ישראל: מיום היות ישראל עד ימי הדור האחרון, מתורגם עברית בתוספת הערות והארות מאת שאול פינחס ראבינאוויץ, חלק ב (ירושלים: מקור תשל"ב), עמ' 93.
¹² שם, עמ' 101.

¹³ Alfred Edersheim, "Josephus" in Henry Wace William Smith, *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines: Being ...* (J. Murray, 1882), p.441.

¹⁴ Jacob Hamburger, "Josephus Flavius", in *Real-Encyklopädie für Bibel und Talmud*, Abteilung 2, (Sterlitz, 1882), ss.502-510.

¹⁵ As Daniel Schwartz demonstrates, his reception among prominent Jewish/Israeli historians in the second half of the twentieth century became much more neutral and even positive. See: Daniel R. Schwartz, "War and Antiquities-between Masada and Jotapata: Josephus in Hebrew Scholarship from the 1930s to the 1990s", in *Zion*, Volume 74, 2009, pp.45-63 (Hebrew).

¹⁶ Alfred Edersheim, *History of the Jewish Nation after the Destruction of Jerusalem Under Titus*, p. 32.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.30.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pp.32-33

¹⁹ See for example: Martin Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome, A.D. 66-70* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp.198–199; 238 (note 12).

²⁰ Alfred Edersheim, *History of the Jewish Nation after the Destruction of Jerusalem Under Titus*, pp.29-30.

²¹ "Josephus", *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, p.459. This of course is one of the most debated texts in Josephus and the interesting point here is that even Edersheim, the "Christian", is claiming that it is not authentic.

²² *Ibid* (footnote 1).

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.449

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.452

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.461.

²⁷ Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol.1, pp. 214–215.

²⁸ In the same breath it should be noted that he also attacks several Christian writers (such as Eisenmenger and Wagenseil) for their "violent hatred of Judaism and Jews". See: Edersheim, *History of the Jewish Nation after the Destruction of Jerusalem Under Titus*, p.IX