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Josephus on the servile origins of the Jews

This paper argues that Josephus deliberately obscures and de-emphasises the servile origins of the Jews in books 1-2 of the Antiquities, probably reflecting to late 1st century literate elite attitudes towards freedmen, and then-current ideas about natural slavery and slavery-by-chance.

As the defining account of its nationhood and its covenant with God, the story of the Israelites' slavery in Egypt and subsequent redemption was central to Jewish identity. At key points in his rewriting of the Pentateuch, however, Josephus obscures the story of the Jew's servile origins. For example, Josephus modifies God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15, noting that Abraham's posterity will suffer rather than be enslaved. Josephus' repeated emphasis on Joseph's virtue, high-birth, and nobility under changed circumstances, and extra-biblical details like Joseph's education as a free-born man, and Jacob's suspicion that Joseph has been captured and enslaved, suggest the Josephus was apologetically casting Joseph as a slave-by-chance. While Exodus 1 makes it clear that the Israelites were enslaved, in Josephus' version, they were only mistreated. Although Josephus does not eliminate every reference to slavery in Egypt, he downplays the Israelites' servitude at key points in the narrative.

Josephus' sensitivity to the Jews' servile origins may stem from specific, late 1st century factors. Aristotle's theory of natural slavery is echoed in the first century attitudes of Philo and Cicero, who acknowledge that men can be enslaved unfairly by chance. Josephus emphasises that his own captivity left no slight on his civil status. In addition, late 1st century Roman historians, such as Suetonius and Tacitus, were highly critical of the power of imperial freedmen, and Josephus seems to share this bias. Both of these factors may have played a role in Josephus' downplaying the Jews' servile origins.