CHAPTER FOUR

THE ORIGINS OF APOLOGETIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

We discovered these things because we were very eager to understand Phoenician culture and investigated a good deal of material beyond what is found in Greek authors, since that is contradictory and has been written by some more for the sake of argumentation than for truth.

Philo of Byblos in PE 1.9.27

While the imposition of Hellenism on the East was a political and cultural reality, it was not achieved without resistance. The opposition assumed various forms depending upon the position of the conquered. Within a literary context one of the responses was the attempt to readdress the identity of the subdued ethnic group. The tendency in ethnography to measure Near Eastern cultures by Greek standards did not sit well with those who felt that they had been misrepresented and shortchanged. This was particularly true for the priests of the various cults who—because they were both the guardians of the sacred traditions and in positions of authority—were in a unique position to respond. At the same time, these priests could not avoid coming to grips with Hellenism: it is no accident that they wrote in Greek and were influenced by Greek literary forms. The result was the creation of a new literary genre which challenged and identified with Hellenism at the same time.

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Berossos

Life

The first indigenous author to present a native perspective was Berossos. Berossos was not a Greek, but ἄνήρ βαβυλώνιος (TT 2, 8d). He must have been born c. 350 B.C.E. since he was a contemporary of Alexander the Great (TT 1, 2; F 1) and lived well into the next century. He was apparently trained as a scribe in the traditional Sumerian and Akkadian classics since he became ἴσαρεὺς τοῦ παρ’ αὐτοῖς βήλου (T 2). How familiar he was with Greek literature is a matter of dispute. Josephos wrote about him: γνώριμος δὲ τοῖς περὶ παιδείαν ἀναστρεφομένοις (CA 1.129 = T 3). A. von Gutschmid thought that this meant he had received a Greek education. P. Schnabel has, however, correctly argued that it means he was familiar to the Greeks as the subsequent clause suggests. He did, nonetheless, have some familiarity with Greek literature as we will show. Stanley Burstein has taken this a step further by suggesting that he was a member of the Seleucid court. While it may


3 His name has come down to us in multiple forms. The two major problems for the Greek name are whether it should have one σ or two and where the accent belongs. I have followed Schnabel, Berossos und die babylonisch-hellenistische Literatur, pp. 3-5, in opting for the double σ. Komoróczy, “Berossos and the Mesopotamian Literature,” p. 125, has suggested that his name was Bel-re’usu, “‘Bel is his shepherd.”

4 He is also called ἄνηρ Χαλδαῖος μὲν τὸ γένος (TT 3, 7b) and virum Chaldaeum (T 4).

5 Komoróczy, “Berossos and the Mesopotamian Literature,” p. 125, suggests that his training would have taken place in the temple of Marduk in the Esagila, a scientific center of Hellenistic Mesopotamia.

6 He was also called ἄνηρ ἰκανώτατος (T 2) and omnis doctrinae peritissimum (T 4).

7 See the discussion in Schnabel, Berossos und die babylonisch-hellenistische Literatur, p. 15. Cf. also the translation of H. St. J. Thackeray in the LCL: “My witness here is Berosus, a Chaldaean by birth, but familiar in learned circles through his publication for Greek readers of works on Chaldaean astronomy and philosophy.”

8 Burstein, The “Babyloniaca” of Berossus, p. 5. He adduces three bases for his conclusion: Berossos’ ability in Greek, his familiarity with Greek conceptions of the Babylonian past, and the dedication of his work to Antiochos I.