CHAPTER THREE

SABBATH AS DAY OF REST AND STUDY OF THE LAW:
PHILO AND JOSEPHUS

Background

Philo and Josephus provide a wide range of literary evidence about the life of the Jewish communities they knew in Palestine, Italy, Egypt and elsewhere in the Diaspora in the first century CE.¹ Both mixed socially with Jews and non-Jews at all levels of society and were adept in the use of appropriate and persuasive language. Their writings display the intellectual ground common to Jews and non-Jews in the first century CE.²

As Philo lived in Alexandria, he was a Jew of the Diaspora, but because he wrote as an apologist, and since his writings have been preserved not in Jewish but in Christian collections, there is some hesitation in scholarly circles about regarding him as a typical Jew. What have been described as ‘‘syncretistic’’ tendencies have been noted in his work,³ and Philo has been described as the Jews’

¹ The writings of Philo may be securely dated to the first part of the first century of the common era, since he was a member of the legation sent from Alexandria to Rome to treat with Gaius Caligula in 41 CE.
³ M. Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during
‘propagandist’ whose ‘numerous literary works clothed Judaism in Greek dress’. However, despite these critical comments on the use of Philo as a source, there is the fact that he was writing within a completely Jewish community, before the time of the existence of the Christian Church, and he was regarded by that Jewish community as a suitable envoy in their dealings with Rome.

I prefer to regard Philo as a typical Jewish intellectual of his day, and to survey his writings to see what he relates, whether on purpose, or in the bygoing, about Jews and their activities on the sabbath. The activities he describes will be examined to decide whether they should properly be classed as worship.

Josephus’s writings span the latter part of the first century CE, and are of various kinds: apologies, histories and autobiography. With Josephus’s writings, as with all writings, we are limited to what he as author wishes to convey to us, but occasionally some material useful to the purpose of this study is embedded in, or described as background to, the matters Josephus is explaining.

In spite of the value of Josephus’s extensive writings, scholars have expressed doubts as to the veracity and reliability of what he relates. Grant judges that his ‘fascinating works … show him up as self-congratulatory to the point of thoroughgoing mendacity’. But taking a more positive view, and although allowing that Josephus (and Philo too) exaggerate in their claims about the acceptability of Jewish practices in the Graeco-Roman world, Gager believes that they ‘stand closer, far closer, to the truth than has commonly been assumed’.

Taking these qualifications of Josephus as a reliable historian into account does not devalue him as an important source for the period in question, even though he expresses his view of the matters he dis-

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4 Grant, The Jews, pp. 122, 126; see also pp. 127-28.
5 A thumbnail sketch of Philo’s social standing can be found in V.A. Tcherikover and A. Fuks, Corpus papyrorum judaicarum, I (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 67.
7 Grant, The Jews, p. 188.