CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JOSEPHUS’ BIBLICAL PARAPHRASE AS A COMMENTARY ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

1. Introduction

In view of the fact that Josephus came from such distinguished ancestry (Life 1-7), belonging to the first of the 24 courses of priests and being descended on his mother’s side from the Hasmonean kings, and in view of his excellent education (Life 8) and his early beginning, while only 25 years old (Life 13), in public life through participating in an important embassy to the Roman court to secure the release of certain priests, and culminating in his appointment as commander of the revolutionary forces in the crucial area of Galilee at the start of the war against the Romans (Life 29, War 2.568), we should not be surprised that in writing his historical works Josephus would be inclined to view events, even those that had occurred long before his own time, through his own reaction to them and as, in effect, comments on and lessons for the present.

At the very beginning of his Antiquities of the Jews (1.3), Josephus, in setting forth the reasons for his writing the history of the Jewish people, identifies himself with those who, induced by the magnitude of useful events, which currently, he felt, lie in a state of ignorance, have endeavored to bring forth the history of those events for common advantage. That historiography serves such a purpose would seem to reflect the statement of Josephus’ major model, Thucydides (1.22.4),¹ that he seeks to make his history profitable for his readers, since he believes that the events of the past will some day, in all human probability, happen again in the same or in a similar way. Though in the Antiquities he is not writing about the war with the Romans, Josephus in his proem (War 1.4) recalls to the reader his own participation in that war and his aim in writing its history

¹ On the profound influence of Thucydides upon Josephus see Feldman 1998, 177-78.
in order to refute those who had misrepresented it. He asserts (War 1.5) that in writing the *Antiquities* he is addressing the whole Greek-speaking world, the great majority of whom were presumably non-Jews, in order, it would seem, to set the record straight. Again, at the end of the work (Ant. 20.262), he proudly declares that no one else, either Jew or Gentile, would have been equal to the task of issuing so accurate a treatise as the *Antiquities* for the Greek world. That he regarded the *Jewish War* and the *Antiquities* as two parts of a single work would seem to follow from his statement (Ant. 1.6) that his original intention had been to write a single work covering the history of the Jews from their origin through the war against the Romans. The only reason, according to Josephus (Ant. 1.7), why he did not do so was that such a volume would have been excessively long.

What encouraged Josephus to write the *Antiquities*, he says (Ant. 1.8), was that there were certain persons who were curious to know about Jewish history. The fact that the one person whom he cites in particular as urging him to write the history is a non-Jew, Epaphroditus, would seem to indicate that the work, when written, would be especially addressed to such people. In fact, the two works, the *Life* of Josephus and the essay *Against Apion*, which are described as appendices to the *Antiquities*, are dedicated to this same Epaphroditus.

Josephus (Ant. 1.9) lists two other considerations in writing this history, namely, whether the ancestors of the Jews had been willing to communicate such information and whether any of the Greeks had been curious to have it presented to them. Both of these factors show his concern with his primary audience of non-Jews to whom he particularly addresses the work. If, indeed, he is concerned about relations of Jews with non-Jews there are two aspects that he would be particularly eager to address, namely, anti-Semitism and proselytism, both of which are fraught with tension.

As to the former, in the very city where Josephus was resident during the last thirty years of his life, Rome, the Jews had experienced two or even three expulsions—in 139 B.C.E., in 19 C.E., and during the reign of Claudius, most probably because of their alleged proselyting activities.²