CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE REHABILITATION OF NON-JEWISH LEADERS IN JOSEPHUS’ ANTIQUITIES

1. Introduction

An important part of Josephus’ response to the charges of critics of the Jews can be seen in his treatment of non-Jewish figures. Here Josephus was clearly confronted with a dilemma: if he downgraded these figures he would play into the hands of those who charged that he, no less than Jews generally, was prejudiced against non-Jews; but if he showed too much regard for them he would be whitewashing idol-worshippers and, in some cases, enemies of the Jewish people, and so would clearly offend Jews in his audience. It may, therefore, be instructive to see how Josephus deals with such figures as the various Pharaohs mentioned in the Bible, Jethro, Balaam, Eglon, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius, and Ahasuerus.

In view of the fact that he is writing for a primarily non-Jewish audience, it should not be surprising that Josephus is particularly careful, in his portrayal of non-Jewish personalities in the Bible, not to offend his pagan readers. We may see this in Josephus’ more favorable portrayal of the Pharaoh in connection with Sarai (Ant. 1.165), of the Pharaoh in connection with Joseph and his brothers (Ant. 2.185), of the Pharaoh of the Exodus (Ant. 2.238-53), of Jethro (Ant. 2.258, 262-63), of Balaam (Ant. 4.107), of Eglon, the king of Moab (Ant. 5.185-86), of Nebuchadnezzar (Ant. 10.217), of Belshazzar (Ant. 10.246), of Darius (Ant. 10.254), and of Ahasuerus (Ant. 11.216).

2. Josephus’ Portrait of the Pharaohs

In line with his stress on the importance of showing respect for the ruler of the land, Josephus emphasizes the terrible effects of civil strife (στάσις) so familiar to readers of Thucydides’ description of revolution at Corcyra (3.82-84). Hence, to the extent that he was the legitimate ruler of his land, the Pharaoh in his role as king was
above criticism for Josephus. Indeed, the only ground for criticism in the incident with Sarai was that he failed to show self-control. Josephus, then, in an extra-biblical passage (Ant. 1.163-64), remarks that the Pharaoh, not content with reports about Sarai’s beauty, was fired with a desire to see her and was actually at the point of laying hands upon her, whereupon G-d inflicted upon the Pharaoh the punishment that was most dreadful in Josephus’ eyes, namely an outbreak of disease and political disturbance (στάσις). But even in this instance Josephus comes to the Pharaoh’s defense, carefully remarking (Ant. 1.165) that once he discovered the truth about Sarai’s identity (at that point her name had not yet been changed to Sarah) the Pharaoh apologized to Abram, stressing that he had wished to contract a legitimate marriage alliance with her rather than to outrage her in a transport of passion. Significantly, whereas in the Bible (Gen. 12:16) it is before his discovery of her identity that the Pharaoh gives Abram abundant gifts, in Josephus (Ant. 1.165) the Pharaoh’s character is enhanced by virtue of the fact that it is after the discovery of Sarai’s identity and when he has nothing to gain thereby that the Pharaoh gives abundant riches to Abram.

Furthermore, whereas in the Bible (Gen. 41:15) the Pharaoh is impressed with Joseph’s ability to interpret his dreams but shows no particular warmth toward him, Josephus’ Pharaoh (Ant. 2.80) is clearly a more winning personality in that he actually takes Joseph by the hand and commends him for his excellence (ἄριστος) and extreme sagacity (σύνεσιν ἱκανώτατος) in asking him to interpret his dreams. We are likewise impressed by the fact that before Joseph actually gives his interpretation the Pharaoh reassures him by telling him that he should suppress nothing through fear, nor should be feel the necessity to flatter him with lying speech, however grim the truth may be. These words would remind the reader of the assurances given by Achilles to Calchas the seer in Homer’s Iliad (1.84-91).

When Josephus comes to that portion of the Bible detailing the sufferings of the Israelites in Egypt, he is careful (in line with the Bible itself [Exod. 1:8]) to avoid the identification, which we have found prevalent in the rabbinic sources, of this oppressor Pharaoh with the one who had appointed Joseph to high estate, in order to emphasize that not all the Pharaohs are identical. Indeed, Josephus (Ant. 2.202) very carefully remarks that not only was there a new king but that the kingdom had now passed to another dynasty. Moreover, the blame is placed not on the Pharaoh but rather on the Egyptians