EXCURSUS I: THE ESSENES OF JOSEPHUS’ WAR

Although its concentric structure highlights Pharisees and Sadducees at the beginning and end, the following passage on the three Judean philosophical schools (2.119-66) is dominated by the Essenes, whose description consumes 43 of the 47 sections (2.119-61). Before proceeding with the commentary, it seems helpful to pause and consider the function of this famous passage in Josephus’ work. This is especially so because the standard treatments of War’s Essenes begin from the assumption that the people in question were the group(s) who produced and cherished the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), found in the vicinity of Khirbet Qumran from 1947 onward. Such studies therefore understand the meaning of Josephus’ text to be discernible only by comparison with the DSS, in particular the Damascus Covenant (CD) and Community Rule (1QS). Since that procedure ignores literary-contextual clues to Josephus’ meaning (i.e., his own language and structures) along with historical-contextual ones (i.e., what his Roman audiences could have gathered from his language), it conflicts with the interpretative principles that underlie this commentary.

In a DSS-based reading of Josephus’ Essenes, much of his own description must be sidelined to accommodate the hypothesis. When he speaks of constantly traveling Essene males, who refuse to stain their skin with cosmetic oil, whose only leaders are democratically elected, who pray to the sun—“God,” whose rays must not be offended—and hold Greek-like views of the soul’s origin from the ether as well as immortality, even though Josephus emphasizes and celebrates these traits, they must be dismissed either as misunderstandings, perhaps of his sources, or as deliberate “Hellenizations” of the underlying apocalyptic-sectarian reality—at which he does not even hint.

Such a reading not only obscures Josephus’ meaning in the Essene passage. It also invokes categories that cannot easily be applied to Josephus outside of this passage (thoughtless use of sources and “Hellenizing”), and still more it reverses normal historical method. For example, if we were investigating the Pharisees we would first examine evidence for the Pharisees and construct a picture of the group. Only afterwards would we consider evidence that does not identify itself as Pharisaic, but which might have some bearing on the group (such as Psalms of Solomon or Jubilees). To begin by assuming that texts that do not identify themselves as Pharisaic nevertheless represent the heart of Pharisaism, and then interpret explicit evidence for the Pharisees in light of them, would be to argue backwards. The same is true with any other historical phenomenon, and with the Essenes.

This excursus introduces the following detailed notes, which have to do with understanding War’s Essenes contextually, by providing an overview of the passage and its context in Josephus. I briefly consider some historical issues at the end. Excursus II will do the same for King Agrippa II’s major speech (at 2.345), which has likewise usually been mined for other purposes, without much regard for Josephus’ context. As with everything in the commentary, these are offered not as last words but as first words: doorways to help open up the text of Josephus to fresh reading on its own terms.

Location and Structure

War’s Essene passage is bound securely to its context both fore and aft. The preceding material (2.1-118) has highlighted the shortcomings of King Herod’s heirs, whose bitter succession struggle ends with the egregious Archelaus as ethnarch of Judea, probationary to his possible appointment as king should he prove worthy (2.93). Worthy he is not, and he soon finds himself ignominiously exiled to Gaul (2.111). Josephus passes from a detailed account of the succession struggle to the exile with hardly a word about the intervening decade. His interests are, as almost always, with moral questions. In his concluding remarks on Archelaus, he has paused to describe the uncontrollable passion that drove the diadem-crazed prince to abandon his
legitimate wife and “take for himself” Glaphyra, the widow of another son of Herod, Alexander, and of the “Libyan” King Juba II (2.115). In that story Josephus has further implied Glaphyra’s wantonness, exposed by Alexander’s ghost (“You brazen woman!”) in a dream that presages her death (2.116).

It cannot be a coincidence that the Essene passage opens with sharp contrasts on all of these fronts. The first points that Josephus makes about the group have to do with their complete mastery of the passions, their full awareness of women’s “wanton ways” and untrustworthiness, and their lack of concern about any natural, personal succession (2.119-21). He goes on to emphasize their community of goods, their opposition to marks of personal distinction (even everyday cosmetic practices), and their concern, when they achieve positions of leadership, not to outshine their fellows (2.122-23, 140). Josephus’ association of vice and the passions with women (as well as many men) is typical of his larger narrative tendencies. One small but clear example is the phrase “wanton ways” (ἁσελγείαι γυναικῶν), which is what the Essenes avoid by not marrying (2.121). The phrase is hardly found before his time, b but he uses it formulaically—of Herod’s wife Mariamme (War 1.439), Jezebel (Ant. 8.318), Cleopatra (Ant. 15.98), and certain transvestite Galilean Zealots in Jerusalem during the war (War 4.562).

Near the end of the Essene passage, Josephus gives greatest emphasis to the heroic endurance of these men, to the point of fearless death even under torture (2.151-58). This prepares, in both general theme and specific language, for examples of Judean endurance in defense of the laws, on the part of the populace as a whole, in the narrative soon to follow: under Pontius Pilate (2.169-77) and then in the face of Gaius Caligula’s demand that his colossal statue be installed in Jerusalem’s temple (2.184-205). Although the Essenes adopt a peculiarly disciplined lifestyle, therefore, this is only the embodiment of Judean virtue in a concentrated form.

As for structure: I noted that the passage begins and ends with reference to the Pharisees and Sadducees (2.119, 162-66), though they are minor players. This is the first indication that Josephus gives this passage the same sort of concentric pattern that governs each of his works as wholes. If we move one step in, we see that he begins and ends his description of the Essenes by talking about women, their trustworthiness, sexual relations, and succession (2.119-21, 160-61). Moving another step in, he describes the Essenes with the rare nomen agentis καταφρονητής; near the beginning and end of the passage, they are “despisers” of the two great human motivators, wealth (2.122) and the terrors of death (2.151). Then we learn that they “make it a point of honor” (ἐν καλῷ τίθενται τὸθενταῖοι)—another rarely attested phrase—to avoid getting oil on their skin and to defer to their elders (2.123, 146; cf. Ant. 19.299). Although that second reference prevents us from imagining a rigid series of matching panels, the two corresponding discussions of Essene subservience (2.128, 148) reinforce the pattern again. In this architecture, the central panel or fulcrum (2.139-42), which lies at the middle of the passage, comprises the twelve oaths taken by Essene initiates. The pivotal function of this passage is signposted by the matching verbs “reckon in” (ἐγκρίνω) and “reckon out” (ἐκκρίνω), which sit as gateways just before and after the oaths (2.138, 143)—and appear only here in Josephus.

Because this concentric structure matches Josephus’ tendencies in composing whole works—e.g., War features the Leontopolis temple at the beginning and end (1.31-33, explicitly looking ahead to 7.421-36), and works toward the fulcrum story of the murder of Ananus and Jesus (4.300-54)—its presence here suggests at least two things. First, the passage is Josephus’ deliberate and artful construction (see further on sources, below). Second, the Essenes are of considerable importance to War.

Prominent Themes and Relation to Josephus’ Work

The importance of the Essene passage for Josephus’ literary aims is borne out by the concentration of charged, thematic language within it. The ethos of War has to do with Judean manliness and martial virtue: Josephus’ most explicit aim in writing (though there are many others) is to redeem his people’s reputation after their recent defeat, which

b Philo, Mos. 1.305; Dio Chrysostom, Or. 2.56; and fragments of some astrological writers. Otherwise, wantonness was often attributed to men under the influence of drink and women (Polybius 10.38.2; 25.3.7).