RECONSTRUCTING EXODUS TRADITION: MOSES IN THE SECOND BOOK OF JOSEPHUS’ ANTIQUITIES

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Foreword

Writing a story that derives widely from the mythical, religious, and literary context of the Near East, the author of Exodus 1–15 produces a text which becomes a model for the following ages, when Israel is often subjected to a foreign power and always aims to reach freedom. The liberation and the going out of Egypt have always been core themes for Jewish cultural settings and, for this reason they have been modified, elaborated and integrated in all ages.

I will try to summarize how and why Josephus represents Moses in his works, focusing in particular on the second book of the Antiquities, in order to give a wider picture of the exodus in the 1 century CE, when biblical tradition is in contact with other traditions and cultures.¹

It is clear that many scholars have already studied the role of Moses in Josephus (one example is the work of Louis Feldman),² but my own point of view starts specifically from the perspective of the Exodus tradition, analysing the text in order to reconstruct the different steps of the transmission of the story.³

Reflecting on the book of Exodus the immediate question is about Moses: Who is he? What does he represent?⁴

¹ On September 2, 2006 I discussed my doctoral thesis in History and Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean at the University of Pavia. The purpose of my dissertation is to give a contribution to the reconstruction of the Exodus tradition, focusing in particular on Ezekiel the tragedian and analysing his work in comparison with Josephus’ Antiquities and the biblical text. This paper is taken from my work.
³ I want to thank in particular Professor Lucio Troiani and Dr. Elio Jucci (both from the University of Pavia) for their precious suggestions during my doctoral research. A special thanks goes to Prof. Leonardo Marcheselli for his assistance with the English language during the preparation of the article.
⁴ It is obvious, but important, to underline that the Exodus story becomes a model for other periods of Jewish history, such as the Exile, when Hebrews are under the control of a foreign power and, in this way, they reflect the condition of slavery described in Exodus and adapted to a different geographic and historical context.
The biblical account of Exodus 1–15 describes Moses as a liberator, sent by God to save the people from slavery, in strict confidence and contact with Him: he speaks with Him, like Abraham and other people in the Bible.\(^5\)

Moreover, Moses embodies the prophet: this is evident in the similarity between Moses and Elijah.\(^6\)

Moses, intermediary of divine will, resumes also Near Eastern mythology, in particular the cosmogonical myths of the creation of the world and the primeval battle between the sea monster and the positive divinity, who eventually establishes human order and cosmic rules. Owing to this, it is rather complicated to determine who Moses is.\(^7\)

The Exodus tradition does not immediately appear certain and lasting. In fact, until the Hellenistic period, we have evidence of different traditions about the release of the Hebrews from Egypt and the characters involved. Among others, the Italian scholar Garbini questions whether in the second century BCE the Pentateuch could have already been fixed as a corpus and asserts the possibility of a late redaction of the first five books of the Bible.\(^8\)

**Moses in the Hellenistic Period**

It is very interesting that in the Hellenistic period opinions regarding Moses were not the same, even in the Jewish milieu. Moses is often represented as a military commander and ruler. But other aspects reveal


\(^6\) In fact Moses and Elijah are not allowed to observe God face to face (as we find in Exodus 33:18–23e 1King 19:13, even if they are both involved with a theophany: see Briend 1992, 13–50); they are both the main characters of a narrative scheme proper to the divine call, as we can see in Macchi 1996, 67–74; they both choose to be representative of Hebrew monotheism against foreign religions, because in Exodus we have a fight between Moses and Pharaoh’s magicians, while in 1King there is a contrast between Elijah and Baal’s prophets. For an accurate description of the prerogatives of the “prophet” in particular, see Catastini 1990, 10–121.

\(^7\) About the influences of Near Eastern mythology on the account of Exodus 1–15 see in particular Day 1985 and Wakeman 1973. A dated, but not less important study on this matter is Gunkel 1895. Other works about this argument are Grottanelli 1979, 5–36 and Anderson 1987. About the cosmogonical battle see also Catastini 2001, 71–89.

\(^8\) See Garbini 2003, in particular Chapter V (87–109).