JOSEPHUS ON POISONING AND MAGIC CURES OR, ON THE MEANING OF PHARMAKON

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Introduction

Josephus no doubt considered King Solomon to be a paragon of wisdom. The wisdom and sagacity of Solomon are indeed mentioned in the Bible, however medicine is not included in the many branches of knowledge that he mastered.¹ For Josephus, however, healing was apparently a necessary part of general wisdom:

There was no form of nature with which he (Solomon) was not acquainted, or which he passed over without examining, but he studied them all philosophically and revealed the most complete knowledge of their several properties. And the Lord granted him knowledge of the art used against demons² for the benefit and healing of men (Ant. 8.44–45).

Josephus further affirms that King Solomon left magic devices and formulas for later generations: “He also composed incantations by which illnesses are relieved, and left behind forms of exorcisms with which those possessed by demons drive them out, never to return.” (Ant. 8.45). There is no hint whatsoever in the Bible of the alleged magic powers of Solomon. It is however well known that early Jewish, Christian (and later also Muslim) traditions contain such allegations.³ We shall come back to Josephus’ description of magic cures later in this study.

Without considering here in detail Josephus’ biography, or rather, autobiography, we would like to stress that he had been well trained in his youth. His father Matthias (Heb. Matityahu) was indeed “among the most notable men in Jerusalem” and Josephus’ education was no doubt as excellent as could be achieved then and there.⁴

¹ Cf. I Kings 5: 9–14 and esp. vv. 10–11: “And Solomon’s wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the eastern peoples and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men...”.
² Gr. kata ton daimonon technen.
⁴ There are however in Life no details on the curriculum of his studies.
He thus states: “I won universal applause for my love of letters” (*Life*, 8).

Later, when he was writing his works in Rome, Josephus found a benevolent patron in Epaphroditus, who owned a large library, which he apparently could consult at leisure. His works *Against Apion* and *The Life* were dedicated “To you, Epaphroditus, who are a devoted lover of truth.” Josephus might well have found in that library some works of Hippocrates, Celsus, Soranus, and possibly Dioscorides, who was his contemporary.\(^5\)

Theophrastus (370–286 BCE) and Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE)—the latter having in his books XX–XXVI widely used the former—had described medicinal plants. These works also could have been perused, although this remains obviously conjectural. Regarding formulas of poisonous drugs on one hand and of magic procedures on the other, the works of Dioscorides and Pliny were probably the most productive; we shall endeavor to show some similarities.

**Poisoning**

*In Scripture*

Several Hebrew words are used for ‘poison’ in the Bible, mostly in a metaphorical context. Isaiah for instance exclaims: “Awake, awake, O Jerusalem, who has drunk the cup of poison, who has drunk to the dregs the deep bowl of poison (Heb. *kos ha-tar’elah*, Isa. 51: 17, 22).” And in the book of Job it says: “Food in his bowels is turned (into) gall of asps within him”\(^8\) (*Job*, 20: 14).

It is remarkable that Josephus (as Philo had done before him) attributes to the Bible a very stringent attitude toward poisoning. He was well aware of the relatively frequent incurrence of poisoning in Roman

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\(^5\) Epaphroditus is named in the first and in the last sentence of *Against Apion*. We remember that *Life* formed an appendix to the *Antiquities*.

\(^6\) Dioscorides was an army surgeon of Nero, and was active in Rome from 54 to 68 CE.

\(^7\) Heb. *kos hamato*, which may also be translated “the cup of his anger”. *Heimah* means wrath, fury, and also venom.

\(^8\) The “gall of asps” (Heb. *merorat petanim*) features the venom of vipers. The Latin *aspis* designed the viper, but also the Egyptian cobra (*coluber haje*). See also *Job* 20: 16 (Heb. *eph eh* for ‘viper’).