A JEWISH PRIEST IN ROME

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Introduction: Josephus' Priestly Identity

Josephus' entire literary career took place in Rome, far away from the once holy city of Jerusalem and its destroyed temple. On the one hand, it is evident that throughout this career, Josephus could not—in any capacity— officiate as a priest of that temple. On the other hand, however, it is just as evident that throughout his writings he continued to emphasize his priestly status and descent. Moreover, he even claimed that a number of other positive characteristics and gifts—such as foreseeing the future, familiarity with the biblical traditions and his talent as an historian stemmed from his priestly origins. Indeed, Josephus' priestly status and origins seem to have constituted the most important ingredients of his self-identity during the decades he spent in the capital of the empire.

However, while the advantages of being a priest in pre-destruction Jerusalem are obvious, those of being a priest of a ruined temple thousands of miles away from its site, and without a possibility to sacrifice, are much less so. The inevitable question, then, is why Josephus' priestly background and descent remained so significant for him in Rome. The undiminished emphasis on his priestly identity is especially intriguing in the light of the fact that in his later writings he exhibited

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3 In the light of Josephus' tendency to present himself as the most qualified and reliable witness, it is intriguing that he nowhere explicitly stated that he served as a priest in the temple while it stood.

4 See War 1.3; 3.352; Ant. 16.187; Life 1–2; 1.80; Apion 1.54. The main relevant key passages are quoted and discussed below.

much less interest in Jerusalem temple and its cult. This lack of interest is evident in several passages of the Antiquities, where he consistently replaced the sanctuary and the sacrificial cult, which appeared in his sources, with the “commandments of the Torah.” On the one hand, the elevation of the Torah at the expense of the temple is a familiar tendency of Second Temple Diaspora Judaism, and is not surprising in a Jewish intellectual who spent many years away from the Jewish cultic center. However, on the other hand, the great importance ascribed by Josephus to his priesthood is without good parallels in the literature produced by the Jews of Greco-Roman Diaspora.

Moreover, anyone familiar with the way Josephus described himself in his various writings will know that he never wrote anything unflattering about himself, unless absolutely compelled to do so—whether by the exposing accounts of his rivals, or just because the truth was too well-known. At the same time he appears never to have missed an opportunity to praise himself and to present himself as the most gifted and qualified in every respect. The unavoidable conclusion then is that if he in so many words and in such various contexts repeatedly emphasized his priestly status and origins, it was a worthwhile thing for him to do. What and how was he profiting in Rome by presenting himself as a Judean priest? Even though almost every study of Josephus routinely mentions the fact that he was a priest, none of them has endeavored to explain why this fact remained so meaningful to him in the course of the long years he spent in Italy. The undiminished importance of Josephus’ priestly status—in spite of his change of residence and the temple’s demise—is still taken for granted.

While there seems to be no unequivocal answer to the questions raised above, a combination of reasons may account for the endur-

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8 See Cohen 1979, 114–137.

9 See Ant. 20, 262–265, and Life 1–16. See also Cohen 1979, index, under vanity.

10 See, for example, Feldman 1998a, 61–62; 1998b, 545–46.

11 However, see Rajak 2002, 16–21, who suggests several reasons for Josephus’ emphasis on his priestly background.