GOD THE FATHER IN FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS

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1. INTRODUCTION

As is often noted, references to God as father are relatively sparse in the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish writings.¹ The few overviews of the references to God as father in early Jewish literature do not mention Josephus at all or only briefly, and they refer to Philo only slightly more often. All in all, neither of these Jewish authors receives much attention in this regard.²

In this contribution I wish to focus on Josephus and the passages in which he refers to God as father. How does Josephus speak of God as father? Are Josephus’s references to God as father indeed influenced by the Greek world in which Josephus was writing, as some scholars have suggested, and if so, how? Furthermore, some scholars have argued that the usage of “father” for God in the New Testament, and in rabbinic texts, reflects the Roman imperial use of “father,” especially in the form of the imperial title pater patriae. Is Josephus’s use of “father” for God related to the Roman imperial ideology in this regard?

I will begin by reviewing the passages in which Josephus refers to God as father, making various observations along the way. Then I will discuss whether Josephus’s references to God as father should be understood as having been influenced by Greek ideas. Finally, I will briefly reflect on whether Josephus’s use of father for God responds to the Roman imperial ideology of pater patriae.

¹ There are, however, more passages in the Hebrew Bible to be reckoned with than the fourteen or fifteen that are usually referred to; see Böckler (2000). See also, D’Angelo (1992a, 622), who argues that the increase in the designation of God as father in the New Testament compared with early Jewish texts has been overstated, although the epithet “father” did gain in importance.
² See Strotmann (1991); D’Angelo (1992a); Thompson (2000); Puech (2001); Chen (2006); Fabry (2011).
2. God as Father in Josephus

Josephus refers to God as father seven times. Six of these references are in the *Antiquities* (1.20, 230; 2.152; 4.262; 5.93; 7.380) and one is in the *War* (3.375).

2.1. Ant. 1.20

In the introduction to the *Antiquities* Josephus refers to God as the father and lord of all and the one who looks upon all things:

> Therefore, it must be made known that that man [i.e. Moses] considered it the most necessary thing of all for the one who intends to regulate his life properly and to prescribe laws for others first to understand the nature of God and, after becoming an observer of His deeds, with his mind thus to imitate the best model of all and to try to follow it to the extent possible.

> For neither would the lawgiver, if he lacked this contemplation, ever have had proper understanding, nor would anything of the things that he would write with regard to the rationale of virtue turn out well for those who received it unless they had been taught before all else that God, who is the Father and Lord of all and who looks upon all things, grants a happy life to those who follow Him and surrounds with great misfortunes those who transgress virtue. (*Ant.* 1.19f.)

Josephus says this in the context of his preliminary remarks about Moses as a lawgiver. His aim is to explain why the Jewish law books, unlike the law books of other peoples, do not begin by prescribing laws on contracts and the rights of the people but begin instead with creation. He wants to emphasize the importance of understanding the nature of God, and consequently refers to him as the father and lord, or master, of all (πάντων πατήρ τε καὶ δεσπότης) and the one who observes all things. In this manner, Josephus presents the Jewish God as the father of all people, not just of the Jews. This view is concomitant with Josephus’s opinion, expressed a few lines down in his introduction, that human beings ought to try to participate in God’s virtue (*Ant.* 1.23). As Louis Feldman notes in his commentary, Josephus is indicating here that the laws of Moses are directed not merely toward Jews but toward humankind in general.

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3 Translation from Feldman (2000, 8f.).
4 See Feldman (2000, 10 n. 34), for a brief discussion of Josephus’s intention to write four books dealing with the opinions of Jews on God and his essence.
5 Feldman (2000, 9 n. 29).