Josephus’ Account of the Story of Israel’s Sin with Alien Women in the Country of Midian (Num. 25:1ff.)

It is my special privilege to give a contribution to this ‘Festschrift’ for my friend of long-standing Martien Beek, because it offers an opportunity to render him in public a small token of my gratitude and to pay my tribute to him for his wide-ranging and stimulating scholarship, particularly in the field of Jewish studies.

We met for the first time forty-six years ago in September 1928, when we both enrolled as students of the theological faculty of Leyden University. In that year we were both admitted in that renowned society of theological students ‘Quisque Suis Viribus’ and became friends for life. Already at that time he had an enviable gift of speech; he loved to tell a good story with a characteristic tone of humour, mingled with a bit of irony. His interests were broad, notwithstanding an early predilection for Old Testament. Martien was attracted by that singular O.T. scholar B.D. Eerdmans, a man of completely independent views in his field of study, but also of a deep piety, much akin to the sages who speak in the wisdom-literature.

Since our student-days our lives have developed along different lines, but the links, once made, remained unshaken and unbroken. We served our church in different parts of the country and since World War II in different universities, but neither geographical distance nor lapse of time has thrown a damper over our friendship.

For many years we had a close and fine cooperation in a committee of the Dutch Bible Society, preparing a New translation of the Apocrypha.

He lives in the world of the Old Testament, loves its fine stories, its pious wisdom, its prophetic visions. But not only that, the whole tragic-colourful history of the Jewish people from the days of Abraham to the present time, in Erets Jisrael and the Diaspora has enthralled him and makes him eloquent. He understands the spiritual depth of the Jewish adoration of the Eternal One—blessed be He—and of the Jewish ‘gein’.

I have always admired my friend for the magnificent way in which he can sketch the problems, highlight the salient points, show the bearing of new discoveries on disputed passages, and always brings out the message of Law, Prophets and Writings.

In that respect the greatest achievement among Beeks many-sided publications has been, I think, his book ‘Wegen en Voetsporen van het Oude
Testament’, the basis of which were broadcast-lectures in which he very successfully familiarized a wider public with the contents of the Old Testament.

The task my dear friend had set himself in the 20th century was similar to that which Flavius Josephus tried to accomplish at the end of the first century A.D., when he wrote his ‘Jewish Antiquities’. But the circumstances in which the Jew from priestly descent did his work were quite different from those of a Dutch Christian professor. Josephus wished to make known the history of his people in order to exonerate it from all blame, with an apologetic purpose. For many reasons it is very interesting to examine this much neglected part of Josephus’ extensive writings most carefully. In this paper I wish to make a contribution in that direction by exploring the ways in which Josephus has handled a particular passage of the Old Testament, namely the story of Israel’s sin with alien women in the country of Midian (Num. 25:1ff).

After the long narrative of the Mesopotamian seer Balaam, who was called to curse Israel, but instead gave most glorious blessings over that people (Num. 22–24), there follows in the Old Testament—without transition or connection—a story about how the Israelites dwelling in Shittim ‘began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab’; at their invitation Israel sacrifices to the pagan Gods’ and yoked himself to Ba’al of Pe’or’. God’s wrath was kindled against the people and Moses was ordered to hang all sinners (Num. 25:1–5). The next section tells us, how an as yet unnamed Israelite brought a pagan woman to his family quite openly and how that man and wife were killed by Phinees who was praised for that deed by God, ‘because he was jealous for his God’ while others die by the plague (Num. 25:6–13). Then the names of the Israelite and the Midianite woman are mentioned (vss. 14–15) and Moses is ordered to smite the Midianites ‘for they have harassed you with their wiles’ (vs. 16).

Since we deal with the work of Josephus we may leave aside all problems of exegesis and composition of the original pericope. If we then compare Josephus’ rendering of that story in his ‘Antiquitates Judaicae’, we are immediately struck by the fact that he has paid much attention to that incident and has

2 As I have shown in my *Delitzsch-Vorlesungen*, Münster in Westfalen, December 1972 (in course of publication).
3 So according to Josephus (§126ff.), who does not speak of the Moabites, except in passing §130; cf. also Num. 25:44.
4 The quotations from the Bible are taken from the Revised Standard Version.