JOSEPHUS' PORTRAIT OF ISAIAH

Louis H. Feldman

ISSUES

There are a number of reasons for concluding that Josephus realized the importance of the biblical prophets for his history and that he was well acquainted with them. In particular, in his apologetic work, *Against Apion*, where he had to be very careful about his accuracy because he was attacking the Greek historians (*Apion* 1.3–5 §15-27) for their unreliability, he says (*Apion* 1.7 §37) that the reason why there are no discrepancies in what is written in the Bible is that only the prophets had the privilege of recording the history of the Jewish people, and that the accuracy and consistency of their records are guaranteed by the fact that they were divinely inspired. Indeed, as Christopher Begg\(^1\) has noted, Josephus goes beyond the authors of Kings and Chronicles in highlighting the "prophetic" factor in Israel's history.

Moreover, if indeed, as he claims (*Life* 2 §9), he was so precocious that at the tender age of fourteen he won universal applause for his love of letters (φιλογράμματον), we may assume that in the context of the Jerusalem where he was born and brought up by his distinguished family, this meant knowledge of Jewish learning generally, both the written and the oral tradition. Of course, a major portion of the written tradition would have included the books of the prophets. Indeed, that Josephus knew the Jewish Scriptures in its present form seems clear from the authoritative manner in which he mentions and classifies the twenty-two books of the Bible and notes (*Apion* 1.8 §40) that the prophets subsequent to Moses wrote the history of the events of their own times in thirteen books.\(^2\) A clue to the fact that Josephus knew the content of the

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2. As Thackeray, in his note in the Loeb edition (cf. *Apion* 1.8 §40), remarks, these were probably Joshua, Judges + Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra + Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah + Lamentations, Ezekiel, the 12 Minor
prophetic books beyond what he actually includes in his Antiquities may be found in his remark (Ant. 9.11.3 §242) that the prophet Nahum prophesied many more things than those which Josephus has included in his history, which he did think it necessary to mention but rather omitted "in order not to seem tiresome to my readers." Furthermore, we may note that as a pious Jew who must have gone to the synagogue regularly, he would have heard, as we can deduce from Acts 13:15, the haftarah selection from the prophetic books which is read after the Torah reading each week and on holidays and other special occasions. Additionally, Josephus viewed himself (J.W. 3.8.9 §400) as having a divine gift of foretelling the future, as he did in predicting that Vespasian would become emperor. Likewise, he makes a special point of noting that some of the Essenes, with whom he spent considerable time (Life 2 §10-11) in his youth while he was trying to determine which of the three schools of Judaism he should join, professed to foretell the future, that they seldom if ever erred in their predictions (J.W. 2.8.12 §159), and that they instructed their disciples (Ant. 13.11.2 §311) in this art. Similarly, the Pharisees, with whose school of thought Josephus (Life 2 §12) eventually became associated, were believed to have foreknowledge of things through God's appearances to them (Ant. 17.2.4 §43). Moreover, Josephus\(^3\) on no fewer than 169 occasions, mentions the word "prophet" or the verb "prophesied" where it is missing in the Bible. Finally, Josephus exhibits knowledge which he could have obtained only from the prophetic books, notably Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Nahum, Haggai, and Zechariah.\(^4\)

Granted that Josephus is writing a history rather than a book of theology, to the latter of which he intended to devote a separate treatise, we may well ask why he devotes so much more attention to Jonah and to Jeremiah than to Isaiah, especially since so much of the

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Prophets, and Daniel.

\(^3\) See my "Prophets and Prophecy in Josephus," *JTS* 41 (1990) 389-91. I have conjectured that one reason (though, of course, not the chief reason) for Josephus' popularity with the Church is the emphasis which he placed on the prophets, who are, of course, crucial for the theological underpinnings of Christianity.

\(^4\) Isaiah: *J.W.* 7.10.3 §432; *Ant.* 13.3.1 §64; Jeremiah: *Ant.* 10.6.1 §84; Jonah: *Ant.* 9.10.2 §208-214; Nahum: *Ant.* 9.11.3 §239-242; Haggai and Zechariah: *Ant.* 11.4.5 §96.