Alexander the Great was, by all measures, a boundary-breaching personality. His breaching of political, cultural and religious boundaries left an imprint on the course of history but also on the historical imagination of those who wove him into their stories. In this article, I will deal with only one episode that, although historically tenuous, certainly resonated in the minds of succeeding generations.¹ Diverse Jewish sources relate the encounter between Alexander and the high priest. Josephus describes an impressive meeting at Tzofim (Σαφεἱν), Mt. Scopus, near Jerusalem, with Jaddus the high priest, while rabbinic sources recount that Simon the Just, the high priest, met Alexander on the coastal road, not far from modern-day Tel Aviv. The paper will address the relationships between the divergent traditions concerning the story of Alexander and the high priest and the differing circumstances of their derivation. The first part of the paper will be an exposition of Josephus’ story and the rabbinic account. Next, I will examine the traditions’ textual evolution. The article’s final focus will be on the sitz im leben of the tradition of the encounter and the stories that it engendered.

Alexander and the High Priest: Josephus’ Account

The encounter between Alexander and the high priest first appears in Book 11 of Flavius Josephus’ Jewish Antiquities.² Alexander materializes in Josephus

¹ The question of the story of the encounter’s historicity has perplexed scholars from the beginning of the modern period up to the present day. For a review of research on the topic see: Amram D. Tropper, A Legend Reinvented: Simeon the Righteous in Rabbinic Literature (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 126–129.

² This is obviously not the first reference to Alexander in Jewish literature. 1 Maccabees opens with a description of Alexander’s conquests and of his death (1 Macc 1:1–7). It is also highly
at the intersection of the biblical and the post-biblical worlds. The 11th book opens with Cyrus and the return to Zion and surveys the events of the Persian period according to the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, Daniel and Esther. The book’s final section recounts the Esther story (Ant. 11, 186–296), followed by a brief extra-biblical episode regarding a confrontation between the high priest and his brother that led to the slaying of Jesus by his brother Johanan, the high priest. This murder prompted the entry to the Temple of Bagoses, the Persian appointee, amidst the Jews’ tremendous consternation (Ant. 11, 297–301).3

The next chapter, that introduces the story of the encounter, also narrates the story of two brothers locked in rivalry over the high priesthood. The high priest—Jaddus—had a brother named Manasseh who had wed Nicaso, the daughter of Sanballat the Satrap of Samaria (ibid, 302–303). Manasseh was determined to divorce Nicaso over the people’s dissatisfaction with his intermarriage—a potential impediment to his bid for the high priesthood. Sanballat proposed that he move to Samaria and build a Temple on Mt. Gerizim and serve there as high priest. Manasseh accepted his offer, bringing with him a sizeable contingent from Jerusalem (ibid, 306–312). Here begins a new strand, dealing with Alexander and his relationship with Sanballat and Jaddus. Josephus depicts Alexander’s military successes and his conquests up to the siege of Tyre (ibid, 313–317). Alexander demands support from the high priest who demurred on the grounds of his pre-existing, sworn allegiance to Darius (ibid, 317–319). Sanballat, in contrast, viewed Alexander’s approach as an opportunity to boost his satrapy’s prestige. Escorted by a force of 8,000 men, he arrived to support Alexander and succeeded in obtaining his permission to build a temple on Mt. Gerizim over which Manasseh would preside (ibid, 321–324). From this point on, the narrative centres on the encounter between Alexander and the high priest (ibid, 326–339). Alexander indeed heads up to Jerusalem to settle his score with the high priest, yet when he comes into view, something incredible happens: Alexander “kneeled and bowed before God” (ibid, 331), explaining that “I saw this very person in a dream, in this very habit, when I was at Dios in Macedonia”. Alexander relates that this man’s image encouraged him to embark on his campaign against the Persians; moreover, he had even told Alexander that he “would conduct my army” (ibid). Thereafter Alexander

---

3 On this episode and reverberations of its biblical sources see James C. VanderKam, From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 58–63.

3 Likely that knowledge of Alexander and his persona forms the underpinning of Daniel 8:5, see John J. Collins, Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 331.