JOSEPHUS’ PERSONALITY AND THE CREDIBILITY OF HIS NARRATIVE

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Every narrative should be scrutinized carefully and critically, without going to extremes, by reading it in accordance with what the reader understands, wishes or judges as right. The same approach is agreed upon among historians about historic texts, both ancient and modern. Primarily it should be clarified to whom it is useful, i.e., whose interests it serves, or as it is said in Latin *cui bono* (to whom is it good). Likewise the personal, social, and political situation of the writer within his own society and his attitude towards the subjects about which he writes should be clarified.

What is necessary in relation to all historical writings is vital in the case of Flavius Josephus, a noble Jewish priest, a war captive, and a Roman citizen (*libertinus*). Josephus’ writings are a notable case of a narrative that was written under various “pressures” which make Josephus’ writings in general, and *Jewish War* and *Life* in particular, notorious for doubtful credibility. There is a wide consensus that Josephus served his patrons, the Flavian family and especially Titus, by depicting them usually in a favorable light. At the same time, he tried to present his own people in a positive way to Gentile readers by placing the responsibility for the revolt with the rebels, whom he claims were a minority who brought disaster on an innocent people. Moreover, he had to defend himself against contradictory attacks, either accusing him of being a rebel, or of being a traitor.

In this paper I will try to present an additional aspect that may shed some light on Josephus’ tortuous way of telling the history of the Jewish revolt of 66–73 C.E. I also intend to discuss Josephus’ personality, though I am aware of the deficiencies of such an approach. Psychohistory was fashionable some decades ago,¹ but was also

¹ The peak of publication activity in the field of psychohistory seems to be in the 1970s. It includes various subjects such as history of childhood, individual psycho-historical investigation, and collective-social phenomena (concerning revolutions, aggression etc.). See for example Friedlander (1975) and the bibliography there.
criticized on various grounds, mainly because of the inability of the historian to treat his “patient” personally, on the psychologist’s sofa so to speak.

This criticism may be justified from the psychologist’s point of view, but not necessarily from that of the historian. The historian is not obliged to achieve a full psychological portrait and complete analysis of the personality of the individual who interests him or her. We can be satisfied with a partial analysis of the subject, if it helps us to understand certain behavioral patterns of the person who is central to our research; as in the case under discussion, if it explains or answers questions like why did Josephus tell incredible and unacceptable facts and events in his report about his participation in the Great Revolt? These will be dealt with below in greater detail. Here they will be listed briefly: Did Josephus fortify ten places in Galilee? Did he organize a huge army, structured in line with the Roman military model? Was he really a military expert and an efficient commander? Was he the commander of Yodefat when the Romans besieged it? Is it credible that he survived the siege of Yodefat by casting lots and divine help?

Had all these have been told only in the Life it could have been argued that these stories were fabricated in accordance with literary conventions of the autobiographical genre, but since some are found not only there but also in War, this explanation is not satisfactory. We will try to explain the distortions of the story of Josephus’ role in the history of the Great Revolt as (among other causes) a result of a personal irresistible impulse.

To the writings of Josephus, the prolific Jewish historian, we owe almost all of our knowledge of important chapters in the history of the Jewish people in the period of the Second Temple, or “im Zeitalter Jesu Christi,” as Schürer defined it. Josephus had a complex personality about which different and opposing opinions have been expressed. For our enquiry it is not important to make a value

Our investigation of Josephus’ personality is extremely limited because of the paucity of the evidence available.

2 Various historians describe Josephus in differing ways, some as a traitor, coward, crook etc., others as dedicated to the welfare of his people and champion of Judaism etc. Various polar opinions are listed in Klausner (1954, 170–71). Josephus also has a place in literature and among many novelists who wrote about Josephus: probably L. Feuchtwanger’s Josephus, a trilogy, published 1932, 1934, 1952 (in German), which was translated into many languages and appeared in various forms