PART THREE

JOSEPHUS AS A SOURCE
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Introduction

Josephus is an important source for noble death in Second Temple Judaism. I counted fifty-one relevant passages by following a rather minimal definition of noble death as a literary phenomenon based on three criteria: 1) focus on a violent death, sometimes self-inflicted but in any case forced by the circumstances, 2) a positive assessment of this death, and 3) vocabulary and/or motifs typical for noble death passages. Thirty-eight passages match one or two of these criteria or can be considered as relevant because they clearly contrast specific noble death passages in Josephus. Thirteen passages seem to match all three criteria (see nos. 6, 7, 19, 20, 25, 27, 30, 31, 33, 36, 38, 39, 40 in the checklist below). My first and third criteria should be obvious, but the second may need some illustration. A clear example of such a positive assessment of someone’s end of life as a noble death is the brief description of Samson’s suicide, with which he killed three thousand Philistines (Judg 16:23–31; Ant. 5.314–317):

“And it is but right to admire the man for his valour, his strength, and the grandeur of his end (τὸῦ περὶ τὴν τελευτὴν μεγαλόφρονος), as also for the wrath which he cherished to the last against his enemies” (5.317 [Thackeray-Marcus, LCL]; cf. 6.343–344, 348 concerning Saul, below). Most of the noble death passages in Josephus are brief, but all in all they contain much more material than the two chapters on martyrdom in 2 Maccabees that became so famous in early Christian literature. There are at least three reasons to have a fresh look at the noble death passages in Josephus.

First, Josephus’ noble death passages are important sources about constructions of Jewish identity and some have an impact up to the present time. Israel’s world-famous archaeological site at Masada (“Masada shall never fall again,” with Yitzhak Lambdan), one of the great icons of Israeli national identity since the thirties of the twentieth century and boosted by Yigael Yadin’s preliminary publication of the excavations in 1966, would probably not have existed without Josephus’