JOSEPHUS ON ANCIENT JEWISH GROUPS FROM A SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVE*

Albert I. Baumgarten

Introduction

Josephus’ comments on the ‘philosophies’ prevalent among ancient Jews have been subject to much criticism. Can Josephus really be believed when he claimed that he spent a year studying the doctrines and practices of Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes, or is this one example of a topos, according to which an intellectual claimed to have learned from all possible sources?1 Was Josephus a Pharisee, as he asserted, or was this a late in life commitment, undertaken when it was politically expedient, of which there are few if any indications in his earlier works (his loyalty to priestly traditions seems much more important)?2 What were his sources for the two extensive excurses on the Jewish groups? Who was the audience for which these excurses were written and how might his sources and/or the audience have shaped the presentation of these movements?3 Since

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2 This is one of the consistent conclusions of S. Mason, Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees (Leiden: E.J. Brill & Co., 1991).

3 R. Bergmeier, Die Essener Berichte des Flavius Josephus (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993). See also R. Bergmeier, ‘Review of A.I. Baumgarten, The Flourishing of Jewish Sects in the Maccabean Era: An Interpretation’ (Leiden: E.J. Brill & Co., 1997) 1–14. In that book, I did not show how these observations were confirmed in detail by comments of Josephus on the various groups. I am pleased to demonstrate the specific connection between my model of sectarianism and the work of Josephus in this volume, dedicated in honor of Professor Louis Feldman, whose contributions to the understanding of Josephus have taught us all.
the discovery of the Qumran scrolls many scholars have been tempted to identify Josephus’ Essenes with the community that produced the sectarian documents found at Qumran. These scholars have wondered whether we should now correct Josephus, now identified as a less reliable external witness, in the light of the supposedly internal evidence, now newly available from the group.4

These are only a few of the critical questions that have been asked. This paper offers an indirect defense of the accuracy of Josephus’ comments. In the process I also hope to show the keenness of Josephus’ insight into the social and religious dynamics of his era. To accomplish these objectives this paper will have two parts. In the first I will offer a model of how dissident religious groups, which I choose to call sects, arise. This model will be based on examples other than ancient Judaism. To the extent possible, it was elaborated without any conscious reference to the groups of the Second Temple era. In the second part I will show how this model illuminates numerous comments on the Jewish groups of the Second Temple era made by Josephus. When a model helps explain instances on which it was not based, the model proves its descriptive validity. Conversely, when a set of sources is made more meaningful by analysis in the light of an independent model, I believe that to be indirect confirmation of the accuracy of the information conveyed by those sources.

The Social Dynamics of Sectarianism5

The dynamics by which dissident religious groups arise and flourish can be identified through the study of instances of the proliferation

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5 The definition of sect proposed below should be compared with that suggested by S.J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987) 125–127. While I stress the voluntary nature of sectarianism a bit more, as well as the role of boundary marking in separation from the new class of alien, and Cohen underscores the sectarian claim to absolute truth—the agreement between our definitions is substantial. Cohen and I also share the concern to define sect in such a way as to apply to the full range of Jewish groups known from the Second Temple period.