It is hardly a secret that Zionist ideology had a profound impact on Joseph Klausner’s historiographic enterprise. Even a superficial perusal of his works reveals a powerful Zionist commitment expressed in both rhetoric and analysis, so much so that his right to teach the period of the Second Temple in the Hebrew University was held up for years on the grounds that he was more of a publicist and ideologue—and of the Revisionist variety no less—than a historian. Nonetheless, I believe that there is much to be said for a serious examination of the nationalist element in his multi-volume work on the Second Temple.1 However we assess the political and scholarly arguments for and against his appointment, a man who had nothing of the historian in him would not have been appointed to Klausner’s position in the world’s flagship institution for Jewish Studies. With all his abundant methodological flaws, he was not a publicist pure and simple.

Since readers of this article, which will sharply underscore some of those flaws, may ultimately question this judgment, let me move immediately to a second, even more important point. The ideological use of selected episodes in a nation’s history is an integral part of any nationalist movement or educational system. Zionism was no exception; indeed, its unusual, even unique, character generated a particularly acute need to establish a national history that would provide models for the struggling yishuv and the early state. The pedagogic utilization of the ancient paradigms of Jewish heroism had to draw upon academic, not merely popular, legitimation. From this perspective, the fact that Klausner stood with one foot in the world of academic research and the other in the public square, where he exercised considerable influence, lends special interest to an analysis

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1 Historia shel ha-Bayit ha-Sheni, 2nd ed., 5 vols. (Jerusalem, 1951), henceforth Historia.
of his scholarly-ideological approach to key developments in Second Temple history. As Klausner confronted the dilemmas of military, political and religious policy in ancient Israel, his own dilemmas illuminate not only Zionist historiography but the political and moral challenges facing the nascent, beleaguered State.

It is self-evident that Klausner was sensitive to the charges leveled at him by his colleagues at the university, and so his inaugural lecture on the Second Temple, which is also the opening chapter of the book, was devoted to the question of historical objectivity. The argument in that lecture is so strange that only the extraordinary defensiveness generated by relentless criticism can serve to explain it.

The objective study of history, says Klausner, leads to ‘necessary conclusions,’ to ‘absolute evaluations.’ It is true that each generation sees the past through its own experience, but as long as the historian seeks truth to the best of his ability, his conclusions are absolute for that generation. This is an idiosyncratic use of the term ‘absolute,’ and when Klausner proposes a concrete example, the peculiarity of the argument is thrown into even bolder relief. A Jew and a Pole, he says, must evaluate Chmielnicki differently, but precisely because of the ineluctable nature of this difference, ‘there is no subjectivity involved at all.’ Chmielnicki persecuted the Jews but strove to improve the lot of his own people. Consequently, ‘the honest scholar must see both sides of the accepted historical coin.’ Thus, in virtually the same breath, Klausner speaks of the absolute necessity compelling a Jew to evaluate Chmielnicki in a one-sided fashion and proceeds to present him in all his mutivalent complexity. This almost incoherent argument for untrammeled, unmodulated historical objectivity was surely generated by the subjective realities of Klausner’s personal situation.

When we turn to the period of the Second Temple, we confront a series of personalities and events central to the self-image of both yishuv and State: the return from the Babylonian exile, the revolt of Mattathias and his sons, the achievement of independence and

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2 Klausner’s profound impact on certain sectors of the yishuv, an impact grounded precisely in his combined personae of scholarly researcher, Zionist thinker, and public personality, is strikingly evident in the tone of the admiring intellectual biography written by two disciples during his lifetime. See Yaakov Becker and Hayim Toren, יזף קלנשר, ה-יש ו-פו’ו (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, 1947).

3 Historia 1:10.

4 Historia 1:11.