JOSEPHUS’ “THEOKRATIA” AND MOSAIC DISCOURSE:
THE ACTUALIZATION OF THE REVELATION AT SINAI

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Introduction

Notably absent from Josephus’ presentation of the Jewish constitution in Against Apion, the revelation at Sinai plays a major role in Book 3 of the Jewish Antiquities and is the focus for Moses’ prophetic activity. Yet the matter of the superiority of the Jewish constitution and Mosaic Law is central to both Jewish Antiquities and Against Apion. One explanation for the difference focuses on the apologetic context of Against Apion where a treatment of divine authorship of laws would be incongruous. Does this mean that for Josephus apologetic interests inform his conceptualization of the Jewish constitution in Against Apion, and the particular revelation at Sinai is forfeited or subordinated to auniversalist worldview?

By examining Josephus’ understanding of the transmission of Mosaic Law—and his own role in this—perhaps it is possible to discern a link between the Sinai event as articulated in Jewish Antiquities and the Jewish theocracy of Against Apion.

Josephus and the Jewish Constitution

Historical method has been the focus of recent trends in Josephan scholarship. Demanding that we acquaint ourselves with Josephus’ historical

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1 I would like to thank the editors of this volume who invited me to participate in the conference at Durham in 2007.

2 The International Josephus Colloquium as well as the Josephus Group (under the auspices of the Society of Biblical Literature) have provided a forum for the ongoing development of this field. Two of the most recent of the colloquium meetings (Dublin 2004 and Haifa 2006) specifically focused on historical method. One volume has appeared: Making History: Josephus and Historical Method (ed. Z. Rodgers; JSJSup 110; Leiden: Brill, 2006). There are also translation and commentary projects appearing in Hebrew, German, French, and Italian. The new Brill commentary project is available online (http://pace.cns.yorku.ca).
method (as well as reflect on our own), we are now compelled to give due regard to his compositional techniques and appreciate the full implications of his Roman context. Sensitivity to the relationship between the micro and the macro with regard to the text (viewing each episode as part of a larger narrative) as well as sensitivity to context (evaluating the literary, historical and philosophical resonances from his immediate first century C.E. Roman surroundings) has facilitated a transformation in the way that scholars use Josephus’ works as a source. It has become apparent that Josephus’ method and concerns were not those of a truckling provincial clumsily assembling disparate sources; rather, he must be assessed as an author skilfully controlling his material. The history behind the text, whether that of the Jews or his own personal story, is constructed within Josephus’ own conceptual framework, and how we access the “facts” behind the text is central to methodological discussions: according to one view, “It is not possible to detach even one item or case from Josephus’ framework,’ for that framework is pervasive and fully wrought, animating all of its constituent atoms.”

Our concern is not methodological per se, but we will depend upon recent scholarship’s identification of certain pervasive themes within Josephus’ work. Focusing on the Roman context has revealed Josephus’ interest in the Judean constitution (πολιτεία). Fundamental to the narrative framework of the Jewish Antiquities is reflection on good governance and justice—its effects (harmony, ἁρμονία and happiness, εὐδαιμονία), the relationship between the character of the state and its individuals, and the virtues of the lawgiver and the ideal statesman—themes central to political and philosophical discourse in the Greco-Roman world.

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3 Treatment of Josephus’ Roman context was the subject for two international conferences and the proceedings have been published as Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome (eds. J. Edmondson, S. Mason, and J. Rives; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Josephus and Jewish History in Flavian Rome and Beyond (eds. Joseph Sievers and Gaia Lembi; JSJSup 104; Leiden: Brill, 2005). Steve Mason, Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary, Volume 9. Life of Josephus (Leiden: Brill, 2000); xix–xxi, xxxiv–l, and “Flavius Josephus in Flavian Rome: Reading on and Between the Lines,” in Flavian Rome (eds. A. J. Boyle and W. J. Dominik; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 559–89, has been concerned to demonstrate how Josephus’ Roman context informs the narrative; themes of governance—for example, tyranny, succession issues, stasis—relating to the Jewish constitution and Roman political discourse dominate and the values presented as Jewish would find a responsive and sympathetic audience among his Roman elite readers.


5 Compositional critical approaches have revealed the pervasiveness of this theme, which is of particular interest when seen against the background of Domitianic Rome.