JOSEPHUS’ VERSION OF SAMSON

BY

L. H. FELDMAN

Yeshiva University, New York, NY

1. Introduction

It has long been known that many of the homiletic expositions of Scripture known as midrashim are lost and are to be sought for in non-rabbinic writings. Many of them may be recovered in such works as the Septuagint; in Pseudepigraphic works such as the Books of Enoch, Jubilees, the Syrian Apocalypse of Baruch, and IV Esdras; in historians (extant in fragmentary form) such as Demetrius, Pseudo-Hecataeus, Eupolemus, Pseudo-Eupolemus, Artapanus, Aristeas, Cleodemus-Malchus, and Thallus; in poets (likewise extant only in fragments), such as Philo the Elder, Theodotus, and Ezekiel the tragedian; in Philo; in the New Testament; in Pseudo-Philo’s Biblical Antiquities; in writings found in the Dead Sea caves, particularly the Genesis Apocryphon; in Josephus; in such Latin Church Fathers as Tertullian and Jerome; in such Greek Church Fathers as Origen; and in such Syriac Fathers as Aphrahat and Ephrem. Renée Bloch and Geza Vermès1) have, through sample studies, attempted to explain differences among these midrashim by postulating a continuous and interconnected midrashic tradition and by tracing the historical development of this tradition. It is here proposed to contribute to the explanation of these differences in midrashic exposition by presenting a supplementary theory, at least so far as Josephus2) is concerned,


2) Salomo Rappaport, Agada und Exegese bei Flavius Josephus (Wien: Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation, 1930), has attempted to cite all deviations from the
namely that he has placed his personal Hellenized imprint on the Biblical narrative and that his portrait is strongly influenced by his concern for defending the Jews against anti-Semitic charges. In the example here chosen, that of Samson, we shall see that the very characteristics which distinguish Josephus' Samson from the rabbinic expositions—possessed of the four cardinal virtues, and with increased erotic, heroic, and dramatic interest and decreased magical and divine interest—are typically Josephan\(^3\) rather than a stage in the historical development of the midrashic tradition. On the other hand, the rabbinic midrashim are concerned with word play, with the divine and the miraculous, and with the deflation of the heroic stature of Samson, particularly in comparison with the patriarchs. Pseudo-Philo, we may note, occupies an intermediate position, and is concerned chiefly with exaggerating Samson's exploits, while comparing him morally with Joseph, whom he views more favorably.

Though he claims to be making no modifications in the Biblical narrative\(^4\), Josephus is furthering the thesis that history is the biography of great men, especially since the Jews had been charged by such anti-Semites as Apollonius Molon (ap. Josephus, Against Apion 2.148) in the first century B.C.E. and Apion (ap. Josephus, Against Apion 2.135) in the first century C.E. with failing to produce inventors in the arts or eminent sages. Following the Peripatetic tradition\(^5\), especially as exemplified by one of his major sources, the Aristotelian Nicolaus of Damascus, he stresses biography and its ethical dimensions. He increases the stature of Samson by stress-

---

3) Cf. George F. MOORE, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges (New York: Scribner, 1895), 315-316, who remarks: "The more picturesque details with which Josephus embellishes his story [of Samson] are supplied by his imagination." Moore, however, makes no systematic attempt to support his statement by classifying Josephus' embellishments and by comparing them with those of Pseudo-Philo and the Midrash, as is attempted here.
