JOSEPHUS' VITA AND THE ENCOMIUM: A NATIVE MODEL OF PERSONALITY

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Focus and Hypothesis

How difficult it is to think about people different from ourselves. Many students of the history and culture of the ancient eastern Mediterranean still suffer from ethnocentrism, the phenomenon of perceiving or describing people from a different culture according to our own image and likeness. What The Ugly American exposed in regard to Western perceptions of the Vietnamese, recent events in the Middle East did for our difficulties in understanding the cultures of the Persian Gulf. How can modern Westerners avoid ethnocentrism when we try to understand eastern Mediterranean people from Greco-Roman times? We can find one important clue in the ways the ancients themselves understood and described people in their own culture. This study presents one particular native or emic model from the ancient world on how to perceive and present a person, namely, the encomium as described in the writing handbooks or progymnasmata.

When instructing people to write, ancient teachers used exercise manuals known as progymnasmata: "preliminary exercises ... the

elementary stage of instruction in schools of rhetoric”). On route to formal studies in rhetoric, students were initially taught to write and organize their remarks on traditional topics defined in terms of conventional content. Conventionality ruled the day: set topics with stereotyped parts were developed in predictable ways. Thus by being taught to write encomia, literate people were socialized in highly conventional terms to perceive and describe people in their world according to culturally defined categories. This study focuses primarily on the generalized instructions given for describing people as found in the rules for an encomium in the extant progymnasmata. For purpose of illustration, we will apply our study of encomia as a template with which to analyze Josephus’ presentation of himself in his Vita. Thus we hope to gain a clear description of what the ancients considered worth knowing about a person and an example of Josephus’ self-presentation in these conventional categories.

II Progymnasmata and the Encomium

The progymnasmata contain a list of genres in which students were to be trained: (1) myths, (2) chreia and proverbs, (3) refutation and confirmation, (4) commonplaces on virtues and vices, (5) encomium and vituperation, (6) comparison, (7) prosopopoieia, (8) description, (9) thesis for or against something, and (10) legislation, for or against a law. In terms of modern scholarship, occasional critical attention has been paid to chreia, comparison (synkrisis), and encomium. There are now several book-length discussions of


