JOSEPHUS’ PORTRAIT OF EZRA

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1. Introduction: the Problem

An examination of Josephus’ portraits of the great figures of the Bible\(^1\) underlines Josephus’ aim of aggrandizing these personalities, largely for apologetic reasons. It is clear, moreover, that Josephus was well aware of many midrashic traditions which be used to good avail in his reworking of the Bible in his Antiquities.\(^2\)

We should expect that Josephus would similarly heighten the personality of Ezra,\(^3\) inasmuch as the rabbis elaborate on his great


\(^2\) See Appendix 1, below.

\(^3\) See Appendix 2, below.
achievements as chief priest, scholar, teacher, legislator, prophet, and holy man. Indeed, as K. Koch remarks, Ezra’s work was probably as far-reaching as that of Moses, since his ambitious aim was to rebuild Israel as the nation of twelve tribes, including even the Samaritans. We would also have expected that much more attention would be given to Ezra in view of Josephus’ great knowledge of and general antagonism toward the Samaritans, who, in turn, according to the Second Samaritan Chronicle, looked upon Ezra as their arch-enemy because he altered the script and contents of the Torah.

That Ezra held much less interest for Josephus than several other biblical figures may be seen in the sheer amount of space which he devoted to him. Thus, in the portion of 1 Esd. viii-ix (Hebrew Ezra vii-x) which Josephus paraphrases (Ant. 11.121-58) there are 304 lines in Rahlfs’ text (183 lines in the Hebrew version, chs vii-x, corresponding to this). This gives a ratio of only .72 of Josephus to 1 Esdras and of 1.20 to the Hebrew text. This compares with a ratio of 2.70 for Josephus as compared with the Hebrew for the account of Saul, 1.95 for David, and 1.54 for Samson. Moreover, whereas such major biblical figures as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Saul, David, and Solomon are mentioned by Josephus on numerous occasions aside from the pericope in which their main accounts appear, once Josephus completes the narrative of Ezra with a mention of his death, he makes no further reference to him in any of his works.

4 “Ezra and the Origins of Judaism”, JSS 19 (1974), p. 196. To be sure, as Morton Smith, Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament (New York, 1971), p. 122, has noted, outside the traditions which are preserved in the books of Chronicles and in 1 Esdras, Ezra cuts no great figure in early Jewish legend. Thus, for example, Ben Sira (xlix 11-13), in his list of heroes, does not mention him but rather praises Nehemiah; similarly, he is ignored by 2 Maccabees. However, by the time of Josephus, if we may judge from rabbinic literature, Ezra had come to be regarded as a key figure in Jewish history.

5 See my article ‘Josephus’ Attitude toward the Samaritans; A Study in Ambivalence”, in Menahem Mor (ed.), Jewish Sects, Religious Movements and Political Parties (Omaha, 1992), pp. 23-45. A late rabbinic tradition (Tanhumah on Vayeshe 2 end, Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer 37 [38]) recalls the total excommunication of the Samaritans, allegedly proclaimed by Ezra with great solemnity in the presence of three hundred priests, three hundred children, and three hundred scrolls of the Torah and with the accompaniment of three hundred trumpets.

6 For Josephus I use the Loeb Classical Library edition of Ralph Marcus, Josephus 6 (London, 1937). For 1 Esdras I have used the Greek text of Alfred Rahlfs, Septuaginta (Stuttgart, 1935). For the Hebrew text of Ezra I have used the standard edition with the commentary of Meir Loeb Malbim (New York; s.a.).