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**THE PAGAN KING BEFORE THE ONE GOD:
THE ALEXANDER NARRATIVE IN JOSEPHUS,
ANTIQUITATES IUDAICAE XI, 8**

KEYWORDS: Alexander the Great, Flavius Josephus, Jewish Greek Literature, Rabbinic literature, Alexander Romance

SUMMARY: The paper is an analysis of the scene in Ant. XI, 8: the supposed meeting between Alexander the Great and the Jewish High Priest, revealing Alexander's special status as a chosen of God. The analysis concentrates on two issues: the literary character of the description and the problem of Alexander's kingship as presented in Jewish literature.

I. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The awesome magnitude of Alexander the Great [...] obtains in two spheres that are in most context interrelated: in ancient history but also in the expansive mythic strands that proliferate outwards from the historical record. The powerful legendary matrix resulting from this blend of history and myth is by no means an ideological monolith, however, for over the *longue durée* it retains a remarkable elasticity, capable of accommodating an astonishing variety of contrastive, and sometimes contradictory, worldviews¹.

¹ Maddox, Maddox-Sturm 2002: 1.

Among various ancient versions of the Alexander narrative a special place is occupied by a lengthy excursus in Josephus (*Ant.* XI, 8), retelling Alexander's visit to Jerusalem, his meeting with the High Priest Jaddua and the subsequent beneficial treatment of the Jews. The story is remarkable for several reasons: not only because it has found its place in numerous later vernacular versions of the *Romance of Alexander*², interestingly enough serving as a connection between Alexander and Christianity³, but also because it is a vital part of a distinctly Jewish re-interpretation of Alexander's story, accepted by the Jews, as Cary remarks, who saw in Alexander a hero of their own⁴.

The story of Alexander's visit to Jerusalem can be found in several ancient sources. Similar narratives in slightly differing variations exist in the *Talmud* (*Megillat Taanit* 9, *Yoma* 69a, scholium to *Megillat Taanit* 3, *Genesis Rabbah* LXI, 7). These versions, as Kazis states⁵, are not dependent on Josephus' account; rather, they are all to be regarded as derivatives of oral tradition⁶. Similar is the attitude of van Bekkum⁷, who sees the version of Josephus as independent from Pseudo-Callisthenes. A version of the same narrative can also be found, in slightly more elaborate form, in version C of the *Romance of Alexander*.

The narrative in Josephus is in itself diverse and probably originated as a compilation of material taken from various sources, yet it is uncertain whether the compilation was made by Josephus himself or by the source he was using⁸. This material, while probably not directly derived from any form of the Pseudo-Callisthenes romance (if, indeed,

² Through the intermediary of Peter Comestor's *Historia Scholastica* and the Latin version of Josephus, ascribed to Rufinus; cf. Cary 1956: 18, 72-73, 127-130.;

³ But cf. Cary's remarks on remarkably little impact of this narrative on the theological vision of Alexander in the Middle Ages, which was much more influenced by the anti-Alexander attitude of Orosius, Cary 1956: 127-30.

⁴ Cary 1956: 128.

⁵ Kazis 1962: 7-8.

⁶ Similarly Donath 1873, Wünsche 1879, and, most importantly, Pfister 1975; Nöldeke 1890 and Rapaport 1914 point at possible (lost) historical sources of this narrative, although the historicity of the Jerusalem episode is rarely taken into account by modern scholarship; on the rejection of the claims of historicity see Goldstein 1993: p. 70-71; on the possible time of the original composition, see Gruen 1998: 193-194.

⁷ Van Bekkum 1986: 218.

⁸ Cf. Stoneman 1994: 37-53.

such a narrative existed in the first century CE⁹), may, however, serve as a valuable commentary and supplement, shedding additional light on the development of the *Romance of Alexander* as well as on the process of incorporating local traditions and elements into its bulk.

In the present paper I will not attempt to evaluate the historicity of the narrative nor try to establish its possible relation to any historical sources or events. What I am interested in is an attempt to analyse the legendary, mythical content of the narrative and to observe in which role is Alexander put here, as who and a representative of what world-view and what ideological attitude is he presented in the given material.

II. THE NARRATIVE

Chapter VIII is the closing part of Book XI of Josephus *Antiquitates*. The narrative itself, telling a somewhat complicated story of military, political and religious arguments between three parties (the Jews, the Samaritans and the Greek), can be divided into two main strands, the “Jerusalem” narrative concerning the events in Judea and the “Samaritan” narrative, concerning the actions of Sanballat (which, in turn, may have, as Cohen states, two main motifs, the positive and negative one)¹⁰. They are interconnected by the person and actions of Alexander; the comments on Alexander’s father and predecessor Philip and on his successors serve also as the introductory and closing elements of this chapter.

⁹ *Contra* Merkelbach 1977.

¹⁰ Gruen 1998: 192-193, after Cohen 1982, proposes a different organization of the text, separating four main motifs or, as he call them, strands (the encounter of Alexander and Jaddua, two Samaritan stories: one about Alexander giving the Shechemites permission to establish the Mt. Gerizim temple and the other condemning the Samaritans’ duplicity, and the short narratives on Alexander’s military exploits).

<i>The "Jerusalem" narrative</i>	<i>The "Samaritan" narrative(s)</i>
The reign and death of Philip II (304), Alexander as his successor; Alexander's campaign against Darius (305);	
The elders of Jerusalem concerned about Manasseh, the brother of Jaddua the High Priest and his breaking of the marriage law; Manasseh should divorce the foreign wife or be excluded from the community (306-308);	
	Manasseh, condemned by the elders and his brother, approaches his father in law, Sanballat and suggests that being part of the religious community of the Jews is more important to him than his marriage, as the priesthood is part of the identity of his family (309); Sanballat makes promises to Manasseh in exchange for keeping his daughter as a wife: 1. To preserve to honour of his priesthood; 2. To make him High Priest; 3. To make him governor of everything he himself now rules; 4. To build for him the temple on Mt. Gerizim; 5. To have it all done with the approval of king Darius; (310-311)
A number of people in Jerusalem, incited with bribes, rebel to support Manasseh and Sanballat (312)	

¹¹ English forms of proper names according to the translation of W. Whiston.

Darius hearing about Alexander, the Persian king's reaction to the defeat at Granicus, the march of Darius' army towards Issus (315)	
	Sanballat ensures Manasseh that the Persian king will support their plans (315)
Alexander's defeat of Darius at Granicus, his march into Syria, the capture of Sidon and Damascus, the siege of Tyre; (316-317)	
Alexander sends a letter to the High Priests, demanding the allegiance of the Jews and offering his friendship; the High Priest answers that he has sworn his allegiance to Darius; Alexander gets angry (316-317)	
Alexander captures Tyre and decided to proceed with waging war against the Jews (319-320)	
	Sanballat approaches Alexander, joins his side and presents his case; suggests that it would be good for Alexander to have the strength of the Jews divided; Alexander fulfills Sanballat's wishes (312-314); the death of Sanballat (325);
Alexander decides to march against Jerusalem (325); the terrified High Priest orders prayers and supplications (326); Jaddua's dream (327); the High Priest rejoices (328); the High Priests comes out to greet Alexander (329); the king's army expects plunder (330); Alexander prostrates himself before the Name of God (331); the Jews greet Alexander (332); Parmenio's question and Alexander's explanation concerning the dream (333-335); Alexander and the High Priest visit the Temple; the Book of Daniel (336-337);	

The High Priest asks favours of Alexander: 1. So that the Jews could live according to their ancestral custom; 2. So that they did not have to pay tribute every 7th year (sabbatical year) 3. So that the Jews in Diaspora (Babylon and Media) could live according to the laws of their fathers; 4. So that Jews could join the king's army (and as soldiers also live according to the ancestral customs) (338-339)	
	Alexander arrives to Samaria (Shechem); the Samaritans try to convince the king that they are Jews themselves (340); Josephus' unflattering remarks on the nature of the Samaritans (341); the Samaritans come out to meet the king with the troops of Sanballat and invite him to visit their own temple as well (342); Alexander promises to do so on his return (343); he, however, denies them the privilege of the sabbatical year when they state they are not Jews; he promises to consider the situation and takes their troops with himself to Egypt (344-345)
After the death of Alexander and under his successors the temple at Mt. Gerizim remains; the Jews not fulfilling the requirements of the law keep joining the ranks of the Shechemites; Jaddua the High Priest dies and is succeeded by his son Onias (346-347)	

III. THE INTERPRETATION OF THE STORY

The narrative itself has several interesting features. Firstly, its construction is unusual, lacking structural unity. While a lot of scholarly attention has been devoted to the problem of the structural unity/diversity of the story, the problem is still far from being solved; I will just mention the main points of the debate. Cohen proves convincingly that the narrative, as it stands, is full of inconsistencies and logical lapses¹², which according to him proves the fact that it was constructed using various and diverse sources and that in its present form preserved in Josephus it is a contamination of several stories. Despite Goldstein's arguments to the contrary¹³, it seems rather convincing that the first part of the Samaritan narrative may have originated from Samaritan sources. The story of Sanballat arriving to the new king and getting his support for the plans of funding the Mt. Gerizim temple may well have been taken from the Samaritan corpus of legends concerning Alexander.

Secondly, as Erich S. Gruen noted, the story seems to lack a definite ending: Gruen calls it "a surprisingly tepid closure to a tale whose dramatic climax has come rather earlier"¹⁴. Indeed, the development of the prevailing tone in the whole narrative seems rather strange. The story starts ominously, with the machinations of one renegade and one external enemy (connected with both the ruling king of Persia and the enemy nation of the Samaritans) and continues, rather traditionally, with the threads against the seemingly weak nation of the Jews issued by the most powerful military leader in the world: the high tone of pathos is thus established. Then, further supporting the same mood, comes the description of the fear of the nation's leader and then, the assurances of God himself that the dwellers of Jerusalem shall come to no harm,

¹² Cohen 1982: 42-43.

¹³ Goldstein's arguments try to prove its unity (Goldstein 1993: p. 80f.f): he perceives the narrative as uniformly anti-Samaritan and pro-Jewish, contrasting the evil and perfidious renegades (Sanballat and Manasseh) with loyal and steadfast Jaddua. The accounts on their actions, states Goldstein, are carefully juxtaposed. However interesting Goldstein's proposals may be, they are still based upon his interpretations of the text, sometimes (as it is in case of his interpretation of taking the Samaritan soldiers to Egypt understood as punishment and connected with Deut. 17: 12) rather strained ones.

¹⁴ Gruen 1998: 192.

giving the reader hope for both the happy ending for the Jews and the prospective punishment of both the Samaritans and the Greek king. Then the tone of alarm appears again, in the description of the wrathful Alexander approaching the city with the army ready to plunder. The climax, mentioned by Gruen, comes in the form of Alexander's prostration to God and the recounting of the king's prophetic dream. After that, the mood changes: one might expect that after Alexander's change of hearts, when he, surprisingly, turned out to be the God's chosen, at least the Samaritans will be punished. But nothing of that kind happens: actually, Alexander's meeting with the Samaritans shows distinctive similarities to the meeting between him and the Jews. In both cases, the people and their leader come out to meet Alexander outside their city; in both cases, the king is invited to the temple, and while he does not visit the shrine at Mt. Gerizim, he does not deny such possibility in the future. Also in both cases the king allows local men to join his army, in both cases promising rewards; for the Jews, the possibility to live according to the ancestral customs, for the Samaritans, allotments of land in Egypt. The only difference is between the king's treatment of the Jews and the Samaritans is the fact that the latter are denied the privilege of the sabbatical year, because they are not Jews. It would seem that several narratives and two possible aims and purposes have been mixed here; one is the historical narrative, incorporating the Jewish people into the general history of the period and connecting them to the leading actor of the times, Alexander; its purpose could be described, following Gruen's apt definition, as reinventing and invigorating the local history, aimed at a local reader: a story of the importance of the Jews, composed (orally?) by a Jew for his fellow Jews¹⁵ and later incorporated by Josephus into his own work, written by a Jew, to stress the importance of the Jews, but for the foreign, Roman audience; in other words, within the framework of *Antiquitates*, the narrative starts to serve propagandistic and apologetic aims.

The other narrative addresses a different issue: its aim is to define and stress the difference between the Jews and Samaritans, by showing

¹⁵ To use, once again, Gruen's words: "The legend of Alexander in Jerusalem can best be understood as one of several comparable fictions that gave voice to Hellenistic Jews seeking to define their place in a world governed by Greek monarchs" (Gruen 1998: 194).

that even a foreign king, Alexander, saw and recognized that these two nations were not the same, despite the Samaritan's machinations to the contrary. As such, it fits Josephus' tendency to address such issues and to show the difference between Jews and the other nations, like Greeks or especially Egyptians; the tendency is prevalent in *Contra Apionem*¹⁶, but can also be observed in the rest of Josephus' oeuvre. The third narrative strand is the previously mentioned pro-Samaritan narrative concerning Alexander's role in founding the temple at Mt. Gerizim, re-worked by a Jewish source and incorporated into the composition.

The other interesting feature of the story is the way its protagonists are characterized. Let us take into account four of them, namely (1) Manasseh and Sanballat, (2) Jaddua the High Priest and (3) Alexander himself.

The portrayal of the two "villains" of the story, Manasseh and Sanballat, is the least comprehensive and least elaborated. The character of Manasseh mixes together the negative qualities (his obstinacy in keeping the foreign wife, his readiness for apostasy and his ambitions) with certain positive elements (he tells Sanballat that he would rather abandon his wife than his faith and his priestly dignity). As for Sanballat, he is presented by Josephus in a manner rather similar to the way the ambitious and sly courtiers are often presented: he has great personal ambitions, he boasts about his acquaintance with king Darius and he is ready to bribe people to make them take his side; he has no reservations against dividing the Jewish people. He is also a convincing speaker: after all, he manages to talk Alexander into supporting his plans.

Jaddua the High Priest of Jerusalem is presented by Josephus in an ambiguous way. Gruen¹⁷ notices that the main emphasis of the story seems to be on Alexander, not the Jewish High Priest. At first sight Jaddua seems to be presented as timid, afraid, unable to take action and changing his loyalties, despite his own previous assurances to the contrary. I believe, however, that Gruen's opinion on Jaddua as weak (*not exactly the portrait of a commanding figure*, Gruen comments¹⁸)

¹⁶ Cf. on this topic Barclay 2004, an insightful analysis of the way Josephus presents Egyptians, and my own contribution, comparing the images of the Jews and the Romans in *CA* (Klęczar 2009).

¹⁷ Gruen 1998: 197.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

is probably too harsh. It would seem that the passivity of Jaddua has an explanation: he is a tool of God, he does what God has him do and he reacts according to the God's will. His harsh reaction to Menasseh's transgression also proves that he is capable of taking action: he condemns his brother for marrying a stranger and gives Manasseh a choice of either leaving the wife or leaving the community. The interesting fact is that while negotiating with Alexander, he pleads the case of not only the Jews of Jerusalem, but also those of the Diaspora; thus, he is presented as the Jewish leader par excellence; it also guarantees, to use once again Erich Gruen's formulation, that *the Jews both of Palestine and the Diaspora would become an integral part of the Macedonian empire and that they would hold a distinct and privileged position within it*¹⁹.

The image of the king himself is the most paradoxical one. On one hand, in the initial (and closing) part of the narrative, Alexander is presented as one of the foreign kings, seeking the rule over the Jews. Placing him in the line between Philip and the Successors strengthens such a notion, already familiar within the frame of the Jewish literature from I Macc. 1, 1-8, where Alexander is portrayed as a mighty predecessor to the whole line of wicked rulers, descending finally to the worst of them all, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Another such king in the same passage is the Persian ruler, Darius; both Alexander and Darius are initially shown as taking the side of Sanballat and supporting his anti-Jewish scheme (Alexander is lending Sanballat and Manasseh his open support, Darius is believed by Sanballat to would have done the same). Moreover, in the initial part of the narrative Alexander is presented as a powerful military figure, threatening the lives of the Jews for a malicious reason (he is angry, because they did not want to break the sacred oath of loyalty). One would expect such a portrayal to develop into a well-known motif, in which the *hybristes*-offender gets punished by God's just wrath. Such a composition would be natural within the framework of the *epiphany* story, analyzed by Cohen²⁰ and recognized by him as a vital part of Josephus' narrative about Alexander in Jerusalem.

¹⁹ Gruen 1998: 198.

²⁰ Cohen 1982: 49-55.

But the situation, as we see it in Josephus' narrative, develops quite differently: Alexander turns out to be God's chosen one for many years. Gruen points at the fact that the characteristics of the king in Josephus shows him as a man of action²¹: he marches into Jerusalem, he reacts immediately to the sight of the High Priest and the symbol he remembers from his dream, he interprets the Book of Daniel as referring to himself, finally, he grants the privileges to the Jews and he makes final decision in the debate between the Jews and the Samaritans. While at the beginning of the narrative he is presented as the enemy of Israel, he turns out to be something quite opposite.

There is one very interesting feature of these characteristics which, it seems, fits well within the scope of Josephus' aims and ambitions: the main motivations for the actions of all principal characters are connected with the Jews and the Jewish sphere. Jaddua, obviously, acts the way he does because this is what he, as a loyal Jew and the believer, should do. Manasseh comes to Sanballat because he does not want to abandon his Jewish (and priestly) identity, even if he had to divorce his foreign wife. Sanballat, however, would want to keep her daughter married to the Jew Manasseh and to guarantee the position of the (Jewish, albeit renegade) High Priest for his grandsons. Even Alexander's motivations are connected to the Jewish world: he was chosen by the Jewish God to be the ruler of the world; it was prophesized twice, once directly to Alexander, in his dream, the other times indirectly, in *The Book of Daniel*, which is offered to Alexander in the Jerusalem Temple. Cohen's assumption that the story of Alexander's entry to Jerusalem is a part of the *adventus* narrative, presenting a legitimate ruler's entry into his city and his greeting by the local populace²², would suit such a concept perfectly: Alexander may be a legitimate king of Jerusalem, as he was chosen to rule the world by God.

²¹ Gruen 1998: 196.

²² Cohen 1982: 45-49 quotes several examples from the papyri, describing the *adventus* ceremony; he also provides bibliography for the political concept of *adventus*, analysing mostly the material from the Imperial times.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The whole concept of Alexander's kingship finds a new and fascinating realization in Josephus' narrative. Alexander is presented here as a king *par excellence*, a person born to rule. His military prowess, his ability to make swift decisions and especially his largesse in offering the privileges to the Jews (and to some extent also to the Samaritans) are very typical features of the kings, often praised in literature (it would be enough to recall Theocritus' encomium of Ptolemy as well as his praise of Hieron, to quote just Hellenistic examples). In relation to the Jews of Jerusalem Alexander is, as I mentioned before, a foreign king destined to rule the Jewish population, because he conquered them – or so it would seem. In fact, Alexander will be the foreign king ruling over the Jews, **but only because such is the will of the God of the Jews**. By the might of Alexander's reign, by the power of his army and the scope of his rule the God of Israel, who chose him and who, by his prophecy, supported him and his ambitions, is exalted. Thus the Jews are not only incorporated into the history of Alexander: he becomes, to some extent, one of them, as he shares with them two important qualities: he professes his faith in God²³ and acts as the God's chosen. Of course, all this does not makes him a Jew, but rather the benefactor and supporter of the Jewish case. Josephus' narrative on Alexander represents a step in the gradual assimilation of Alexander within the Jewish tradition and presenting him while still keeping his character as an Other, a conqueror, a stranger as participating, at least to some extent, in the Jewish rites and traditions, here exemplified by his submission to the commands of God and his becoming the benefactor of the Jews. Further development of such a motive can be later observed in various Jewish redactions of the *Romance of Alexander*, notably in the *Sefer Toledot Aleksandros ha-Makdoni*, where one of the episodes features the circumcised Alexander seeking for the Lost Tribes of Israel. Moreover, one of the most telling scenes of this narrative has Alexander presented as able to cross the Torah river, which none of his soldiers could have

²³ Note, however, that nowhere in Josephus is it stated that Alexander would denounce other gods or stop believing in them – a fact duly noted by St. Augustine (*Civ. Dei* XVIII, 15, 2) and, in the context of Josephus' narrative, analyzed by Cohen 1982: 57-60.

done; in short, the king managed to do what only a Jew could have done. Such is the power of the legend that by its right, as it is the case in numerous narratives from all around the world, the mythical Alexander has been incorporated into the tradition of the people, whom the real Alexander, in all probability, could not have distinguished from other nations that he encountered and conquered.

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