

The Levites in Josephus: Response to Christopher Begg

Louis H. Feldman, Yeshiva University

We owe a great debt to Professor Begg, who, in his characteristically systematic and utterly thorough way, has collected, analyzed, and commented upon all the references to the Levites in the Bible and compared them with Josephus' treatment of them. My comments here are mere footnotes to his exhaustive text.

I would, first of all, ask whether we should speak about Levites before the institution of the priesthood, headed by Aaron, and the consequent separation between his family and the remainder of the descendants of Levi. Thus Levi in the episode of the rape of Dinah and the revenge meted out by Simeon and Levi, coming, as it does before the separation between the family of Aaron and the rest of the Levites, does not really tell us about Josephus' attitude toward the Levites. To be sure, Levi is the ancestor of the Levites, and Josephus is concerned to respect the reputation of this, the ancestor of Moses and of Aaron; and so, it is particularly significant--an omission in Professor Begg's paper--that Josephus omits the condition, recounted at some length in the biblical text (Gen. 34:14-24), namely that the males of the Hivvites be circumcised, since to give their sister to a man who is uncircumcised would be a disgrace for them, but that if the Hivvites would agree to this, they would agree to a general intermarriage between the Israelites and Hivvites, who would thus become one people. Such a proposal would have struck a responsive chord with a Roman audience that remembered the similar proposal of the Romans to the Sabines after the rape of

the Sabine women (Livy 1.9.14-16). Professor Begg further omits the statement that Hamor and Shechem approved of this proposal and did not delay in implementing it and that, in fact, Shechem was the most respected of all his father's household (Gen. 34:19). Surely a major reason for the omission of the circumcision of the Hivvites is that one of the most serious charges made against the Jews was aggressiveness in proselytism. Thus Josephus, in his apologetic *Antiquities*, does not portray the act of Simeon and Levi in killing the Hivvites after they had been circumcised as a deceitful act but rather as an act of revenge.

Nor is there significance in Josephus' omission of Jacob's castigation of Levi (Gen. 49:5-7) in the blessings that he gave to his sons before his death, since this occurs before the division of the priests from the Levites. As to Josephus' omission by Moses, just before his death, of the blessing of Levi (Deut. 33:8-11), which is so complimentary in praising the Levites for their steadfast loyalty and bravery in the wilderness and for their success in teaching the Israelites, Moses at that point is blessing the ancestors of the twelve tribes. There is no tribe of Aaron, since the priests are part of and descendants of the tribe of Levi. Indeed, in his blessing of Levi in the biblical text, Moses (Deut. 33:10) speaks of the Levites as placing incense before G-d's presence and as burning offerings on G-d's altar. It is not the Levites who do this, but rather the priests; and Moses, at this point, is referring to the descendants of Levi, among whom the priests were included. Moreover, Josephus (*Ant.* 4.320), in his version of Moses' farewell to the Israelites, is content to say merely that Moses prophesied to each of the tribes the things that in fact were to be, without giving any of the details of the blessings given to each of them, presumably because, as an historian, he restricts himself to narrative events.

As to the omission of the Golden Calf incident (Exod. 32), including its reference to the role of the Levites, Professor Begg suggests that this omission is due particularly to its unflattering image of the Israelites. True, this contains an unflattering image of the Israelites, and this is most probably a factor in Josephus' omission of the incident; but I would suggest two other factors that are relevant to our topic, namely the embarrassing role, especially embarrassing to Josephus, the proud priest, played by Aaron, the ancestor of the priests; and, on the other hand, the fact that it was the Levites who stood up against the rest of the Israelites and remained loyal to Moses (Exod. 32:28-29) and who were consequently blessed.¹ Interestingly, Pseudo-Philo (12), who does not omit this incident in his version, says nothing at all about the role of the Levites; but, as Jacobson correctly notes,² Pseudo-Philo, throughout his account of this episode, tries vigorously to depict Aaron favorably and to absolve him of guilt. Unlike Josephus, who as a priest, has a particular reason for seeking to protect the reputation of Aaron, Pseudo-Philo apparently does not, and he does not want to make it appear that he is denigrating Aaron while praising the role of the Levites.

Professor Begg, in his account of the revolt of Korah, says that Josephus does not seem particularly concerned to expatiate on the anti-Levite polemic of his source. He does so explicitly, he asserts, only in *Antiquities* 4.15, where Korah denounces Moses among his fellow tribesmen, the Levites. However, while it is true that when Moses addresses Korah (Num. 16:8), he says "Hear now, you sons of Levi," implying that Korah's followers were Levites, yet the Bible, unlike Josephus here (*Ant.* 4.15), does not specifically say that Korah sought adherents from his fellow tribesmen and from his kinsmen in particular. Moreover, in the Bible (Num. 16:11) Moses asks Korah what it is in Aaron that he protests against

him. There is no indication that Korah had accused Moses of nepotism in selecting his brother Aaron as high priest, nor is there any indication that Korah protested that Aaron's selection was undemocratic, since the Israelites had not been consulted. Josephus (*Ant.* 4.15), on the other hand, adds that Korah's complaint was that Moses had given the priesthood to his brother Aaron contrary to the laws and not by democratic decision of the multitude but by his own vote. Hence, this is presented as a protest of Korah, the Levite, against the Aaronides. Again, Josephus (*Ant.* 4.19) has added, as a motive of the revolt, Korah's statement that if G-d had judged that it was proper to hand over the honor of the high priesthood to someone from the tribe of Levi, he, Korah, was more deserving than Aaron to obtain it, being on the same level as Moses in ancestry and superior in wealth and age, and that if the honor should have gone to the oldest of the tribes, the tribe of Reuben should have received it. In thus focussing on Korah's desire for the high priesthood, Josephus, as often is the case³ parallels the rabbinic tradition (*Tanhuma Pequdei* [ed. Buber] 1). In particular, Josephus agrees with the rabbinic tradition that Korah was jealous that Aaron, rather than he, was chosen for this position (*Numbers Rabbah* 18.4, *Tanhuma Bo* 4.86-88, *Tanhuma Korah* 3).⁴

In order to appreciate what Josephus has done, we would do well to compare his account with that of Pseudo-Philo (16-17), who often parallels Josephus.⁵ There we find no mention that Korah is a Levite or that he is protesting on behalf of the Levites against the choice of Aaron as high priest. Rather, the occasion (16:1) is G-d's command, which Korah and his followers find unbearable, to wear fringes on garments, which we find mentioned (Num. 15:37-41) just before the account of Korah's rebellion.⁶ Moreover, significantly, in

the chapter (17:1) immediately after the account of Korah's rebellion and after the account of how Korah and his men had been swallowed up, and, indeed, quite independent of it, Pseudo-Philo describes how the identity of the high priest was revealed by rods that were to be taken for the twelve tribes and how the rod that grew flowers would indicate G-d's choice for high priest. Again, here there is no mention of the Levites and of their dispute with the Aaronides. Apparently, then, Josephus' aim in his recasting of the story of Korah was to emphasize that Aaron, and not the Levite Korah, was G-d's choice to be high priest, and that Korah was motivated by jealousy in seeking to displace Aaron.

In addition, there are several omissions in Professor Begg's account that indicate Josephus' desire to place a pro-priestly flavor upon his version. Thus, whereas the Bible (Deut. 10:8) states that "At that time the L-rd set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the L-rd," Josephus (*Ant.* 3.136) says that it was carried by the priests. Again, he specifically states (*Ant.* 4.304) that Moses handed over to the priests the poem containing his prediction of future events, as well as the ark, in which the ten commandments were deposited.⁷ Furthermore, whereas the Bible (1 Sam. 6:19) mentions that seventy men of Beth Shemesh, without further identification, were slain because they had dared to peer into the ark, Josephus asserts (*Ant.* 6.16) that seventy who approached the ark were slain, since, as he adds, not being priests, they were not privileged to touch it. Professor Begg, to be sure, does cite this latter passage, but he does not stress the important difference between the biblical text and that of Josephus.

At the very beginning of his narrative, whereas Judges 19:1 speaks simply of a Levite, Josephus describes him as a Levite of the lower ranks (ἀνήρ τῶν

δημοτικωτέρων: “of the simple people,” “of common folk,” “of the rabble”) (*Ant.* 5.136).⁸ This is in contrast to Elkanah, the father of the prophet Samuel, who is described as coming from the middle ranks of the Levites (*Ant.* 5.342). We may note that there was a considerable rivalry between the priests and the Levites; and Josephus, as a priest, tends to lower the stature of the Levites.

In his rewriting of the Bible, Josephus, as a priest, was particularly sensitive to the attempt of the Levites to attain the status of the priests. Apparently, this was an issue that was very much alive in Josephus’ day. Josephus, as noted by Professor Begg, may well be thinking of the incident, during the procuratorship of Albinus (62-64 C.E.), in which those Levites who were singers of hymns succeeded in persuading King Agrippa II to convene the Sanhedrin and to grant them permission to wear linen robes on equal terms with the priests (*Ant.* 20.216-18). This, says Josephus, was contrary to the ancestral laws, and he ominously declares that such transgression was bound to make the Jews liable to punishment, presumably by G-d himself (*Ant.* 20.218).⁹

Nevertheless, the quarrel between the priests and the Levites is, so to speak, a family quarrel; and Josephus could not afford to allow his confederates in the Temple service to be degraded to such a low level as would appear to be the case from the Hebrew text of Judges 19:1.

It is true that Moses is described by the same epithet, δημοτικώτερον (*Ant.* 3.212) that is used of the Levite in our narrative. But it is clear that Moses is hardly a commoner. Rather, he is dressed like any ordinary person in order to appear no different from the crowd. Indeed, when Solomon’s friends advise the new king, Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, to speak to the people in a more popular

style (δημοτικώτερον) than was usual for the royal dignity, this is merely practical advice because they realize that subjects naturally like affability in their kings and wish to be treated almost as equals; and it is consequently wise to give this impression. It is true that the Pharisees, with whom Josephus was identified politically (Life12), in contrast to the Sadducees (Ant. 13.298), had the support of the masses; but, as Mason notes, Josephus laments the fame and popularity of the Pharisees (War 1.110-12, 2.162; Ant. 13.400-4; 18.17; Life 191-94).¹⁰

That the word δημοτικός may have a pejorative connotation may be seen from the passage in which Josephus describes how, after the capture of Jerusalem by Pompey, the royal power that had formerly been bestowed upon those who were high priests now became the privilege of commoners (δημοτικῶν ἀνδρῶν) (Ant. 14.77-78). A similar pejorative connotation may be seen in the statement that when the Hasmoneans lost their royal power it passed to Herod, who came from a house of common people (οἰκίας ὄντα δημοτικῆς) (Ant. 14.491).

If the Levite in the narrative emerges as a loyal and kindly husband who cannot bear the degradation brought upon his wife, this does not cast a better light upon him as a Levite but rather contributes to the romantic motif that Josephus stresses in the story. Whereas in the Bible he hands over his wife to the mob (Judg. 19:25), in Josephus it is they who seize her by force (Ant. 5.146); but this is Josephus' way of increasing the drama rather than an attempt to raise the reputation of the Levite as a Levite. Alternatively, we may suggest that Josephus is eager to protect the Levites from dishonor, and that he therefore stresses that this man was a commoner, of the lower ranks and consequently not the sort of Levite who would be of near priestly status.

Professor Begg has noted a number of instances, in connection with his portrayal of King Hezekiah and his reign, in which Josephus has aggrandized the role of the priests and diminished the role of the Levites. To these we may add Josephus' significant omission of the statement that the Levites were more upright in heart than were the priests in sanctifying themselves (2 Chronicles 29:34; *Ant.* 9.263). Likewise, whereas in the Bible the Levites and the priests cleanse the Temple (2 Chronicles 29:12-17), in Josephus it is the priests alone who open the Temple and prepare the vessels of G-d (*Ant.* 9.263). Again, whereas the biblical text states that the king and the people were forced to postpone their celebration of the Passover until the following month because the priests had not sanctified themselves in sufficient numbers (2 Chronicles 30:2-3), Josephus, reluctant to criticize the priests, omits this detail. Clearly, Josephus, as a priest who proudly mentions his priestly ancestry as the very first point in his *Life* (1), was embarrassed by the secondary role played by the priests during Hezekiah's reign.

This may help to explain why Josephus, though he does build up Hezekiah in some respects, deliberately chooses not to build up Hezekiah as a person with the complete gamut of virtues that he emphasizes in so many other biblical personalities, but rather to portray him as the pious servant of G-d who triumphs because G-d rewards his piety. This will explain why Josephus makes the amazing and utterly extra-biblical remark about Hezekiah's actual cowardice (*Ant.* 10.5), which serves all the more to highlight his dependence upon G-d alone. Indeed, it is surely indicative of Josephus' concern not to exalt the personality of Hezekiah unduly that he omits completely the biblical statement that after the withdrawal of Sennacherib from the siege of Jerusalem many

brought gifts to the Temple and precious objects to Hezekiah so that he was exalted in the sight of all nations from that time onward (2 Chronicles 32:23; *Ant.* 10.23).

On the other hand, in the case of Ezra we find, as Professor Begg correctly notes, that Josephus seems to lean over backwards to give more credit to the Levites. Thus, whereas the Persian King Artaxerxes, in his letter commissioning Ezra for his work, the biblical text (Ezra 7:13, 1 Esdras 8:10) gives permission to those priests and Levites who wish to do so to accompany Ezra to Jerusalem, Josephus (*Ant.* 11.123) mentions permission only for the Levites.¹¹ Again, whereas the biblical text (1 Esdras 8:42) states that when Ezra assembled people for the trip to Jerusalem, he found none of the descendants of the priests or of the Levites, Josephus (*Ant.* 11.134), obviously embarrassed by the fact Ezra, a priest, was unable to get his fellow priests to join him, says that there came to Ezra a great number of priests, Levites, porters, temple-musicians, and temple-servants. Josephus might have omitted mention here of the Levites, but that would have strained his credibility, since the royal decree specifically permitted priests and Levites to accompany him.

On the other hand, as Professor Begg remarks, the Levites play an important role in the biblical narrative (1 Esdras 9:48, Nehemiah 8:7-8) in teaching the Torah to the people, whereas Josephus (*Ant.* 11.155-56) has eliminated their role, and it is Ezra alone who teaches them.

In conclusion, Professor Begg has made a convincing case for a sporadic picture: there are certainly some instances where Josephus is anti-Levitical, but he is not completely consistent. Why? My suggestion is that Josephus is a historian who wants to gain credibility, especially since he had a number of

rivals and detractors. One way to do so was by demonstrating that he was really not prejudiced but was impartial, just as he presents a balanced picture of the Pharisees.¹²

NOTES

¹ Note that Philo (*De Vita Mosis* 2.32.170) has not only not omitted the account of the Golden Calf but has called special attention to the heroic behavior of the Levites, who, he says, “when they heard the proclamation [of Moses to punish the sinners], came running with all speed, like troops for whom one signal is enough, showing by their swiftness their zeal and the keenness of the inward feelings that urged them to piety.” Similarly, Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus* 1.15.79.

² Howard Jacobson, *Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 484.

³ On Josephus’ acquaintance with the oral tradition as later reduced to writing by the rabbis, see my *Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 65-73.

⁴ The rabbis also have a tradition that Korah was jealous that Moses had bypassed him and had instead appointed his cousin Elizaphan ben Uzziel as chief of the Levite division of the Kohathites (*Numbers Rabbah* 18.2).

⁵ See my Prolegomenon to reprinting of M. R. James, *The Biblical Antiquities of Philo* (New York: Ktav, 1971) lviii-lxvi and “Epilegomenon to Pseudo-Philo’s *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 25 (1974) 306-7.

⁶ Cf. Targum Jonathan on Num. 16:2.

⁷ On the other hand, according to Deut. 31:9, Moses, after writing the Torah, handed it over to “the priests, the sons of Levi, the bearers of the ark of the covenant,” whereas a few verses later (Deut. 31:25) we read that Moses commanded “the Levites, the bearers of the ark of the covenant” to place the book of the Torah at the side of the ark.

⁸ Étienne Nodet, *Flavius Josèphe, Les Antiquités Juives: Livres IV et V*, vol. 2 (Paris: du Cerf, 1995) 148* (on Ant. 5.136), suggests that whereas the Hebrew (Judg. 19:1) reads that the Levite was sojourning in the remote parts (בִּרְכֹתָי lit., “in inner parts”) and the Septuagint ἐν μηροῖς (lit., “in thighs”), Josephus understands the word in a social sense, “in a low rank.”

⁹ On the background of this dispute see my Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities, Books XVIII-XX* (Loeb Classical Library, vol. 9; London: Heinemann, 1965), 504-5, n.b; Heinemann Vogelstein, *Der Kampf zwischen Priestern und Leviten seit den Tagen Ezechiels: Eine historisch-kritische Untersuchung* (Stettin: Nagel, 1889), and Rudolf Meyer, “Levitische Emanzipationsbestrebungen in nachexilischer Zeit,” *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 41 (1938) 721-28, especially 727.

¹⁰ Steve Mason, *Flavius Josephus on the Pharisees: A Composition-Critical Study* (Leiden: Brill, 1991) 243.

¹¹ Hudson has emended the text to read καὶ ἱερέων καὶ Λευιτῶν (“both priests and Levites”), but this is simply Hudson’s desperate attempt to make Josephus accord with the Bible.

¹² See my *Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible* (above, n. 3), 189-90.