

READING JOSEPHUS WITH CAVEAT: PHARISEE-PROPHET-PENSIONER

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The Background of Josephus' Peculiar Bias as an Author:

Josephus the Prodigy & Pharisee

According to his autobiography, Joseph ben Mattityahu was born in Jerusalem in 37-38 C.E. into an aristocratic, priestly family; his great-grandfather on his mother's side was the Hasmonean high priest Jonathan. He describes himself as a child prodigy, capable, at age 14, of clarifying details of the law to the leading priests of the city.

Josephus then relates his study of the different Jewish schools of thought (the Essenes, Sadducees, and Pharisees), his period of discipleship in the wilderness, and his decision to become a Pharisee (*Life* 11-12).

At the age of twenty-six, Josephus went to Rome and successfully advocated before Nero for the release of some priests who had been arrested and sent to Rome on what he describes as an insignificant charge. Upon returning from Rome, Josephus became aware of popular hostility against the misrule of the Roman procurator Florus; he claims that he tried to suppress the revolutionaries (*Life* 17), but eventually, pretended to concur with them out of fear for his personal safety (22).

Josephus the Jewish General

In *Jewish Wars*, Josephus describes a period of irresponsible revolution, which brought the entire nation unwillingly into war against the Romans. These initial conflicts culminated in the defeat of the Roman legate of Syria, Cestius Gallus. He then describes how the moderate Jerusalem leadership took control of the revolt and appointed generals with similarly moderate views; Josephus was himself appointed the military governor of the Galilee in the militarily strategic north of Israel.

According to *JW*'s narrative, Josephus served as an outstanding and ingenious general. Throughout, Josephus describes himself as a daring, inventive, and beloved leader. He even claims that when the Roman general Vespasian found out that Josephus had slipped into the besieged town of Jotapata, the general regarded it as a great piece of luck since "the most able of his enemies had put himself into a noose" (*JW* 3.143). Josephus describes with abundant self-admiration his clever defense of Jotapata, including pouring boiling oil on the soldiers and boiled fenugreek on the Roman gangplanks to make the soldiers slip.

When the Romans captured Jotapata in July of 67, Josephus "helped by divine providence," escaped to a cave with 40 others. *JW* describes the exact fulfillment of his prediction that Jotapata would fall on the 47th day of the siege and his dreams of the coming calamities facing the Jews and the fortune of the Romans. The other occupants of the cave committed themselves to die free and threatened Josephus, who was considering surrender.

Josephus convinced the others to participate in a suicide lottery where each person would kill the next. Providentially, Josephus and one other were the last to draw lots, and Josephus convinced him to join him in surrendering to the Romans.

Upon arriving in Vespasian's camp, Josephus prophesied (referencing a recent comet and O.T. Messianic passages) that Vespasian would shortly become the new emperor.

Josephus remained in Roman custody for the next two years until his prophecy came true and Vespasian was acclaimed emperor (June 69). At that point, Vespasian released Josephus from his chains, and Titus was put in charge of the siege of Jerusalem. Again, Josephus took on the mantle of the prophet, imagining himself as Jeremiah, counseling the besieged occupants of Jerusalem to submit to the great power.

Josephus the Imperial Historian

Titus brought Josephus to Rome, where he lived the remainder of his life. Vespasian granted Josephus Roman citizenship and provided him with a pension and a large estate in Judea. During the reign of Titus, Josephus composed the *History of the Jewish War* (JW), which begins with the war against Antiochus Epiphanes and concludes with the fall of Jerusalem (book 6) and its aftermath (book 7).

JW was written under imperial sponsorship, and so it is not surprising that blame for the tragic destruction of Jerusalem is deflected from the Romans. Instead, responsibility is placed upon progressively worse Roman administration of Judea, which encouraged a small group of reckless Jewish

revolutionaries and did not quell the simmering ethnic tensions.

The 20 volume *Antiquities of the Jews* (*AJ*) retells all of Jewish history until the year 66 C.E., but also maintains a structural focus on Jerusalem, whose destruction in 586 concludes book 10, and whose destruction in 70 C.E. is predicted in book 20. *AJ*, which was probably written under Domitian in the 90s, presents a defense of Judaism, attesting to the antiquity, wisdom, and purity of Jewish tradition.

Some historians see *AJ*, as well as Josephus' last book, *Against Apion*, as reflecting a heightened religious sensibility. For example, Josephus' occasionally describes the Pharisees with a degree of adulation absent from *JW*, and his standard for piety has become more law-centered and less Temple-centered (as it was in *JW*).

Josephus' *Life* was primarily written as a response to a history of the war written by Justus of Tiberias. Based on the arguments that Josephus makes, Justus apparently accused Josephus of causing rebellion against Rome in Tiberias, and of having behaved like a brutal, greedy tyrant. Hence, *Life* begins with Josephus' outstanding pedigree and his scholarly credentials and continues to attempt to refute Justus' claims.

- *THE ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA*

The Honor-Shame Societal Setting of Reciprocity Obligations:

Patronage and Friendship

“Numerous examples of **brokerage** can be found in the letters of Cicero, Pliny the Younger and Fronto, correspondence providing windows into public policy from the late republic through the second century of the empire. Pliny’s letters to the emperor Trajan (dating from A.D. 111–113, the time during which Pliny was governor of Bithynia) contain attempts by Pliny to procure imperial favors for his own friends and clients. In one such letter (*Ep.* 10.4), Pliny introduces a client of his, named Voconius Romanus, to Trajan with a view to getting Voconius a senatorial appointment. He addresses Trajan clearly as a client addressing his patron and proceeds to ask a favor for Voconius. Pliny offers his own character as a guarantee of his client’s character, and Trajan’s “favorable judgement” of Pliny (not Voconius, whom he does not know) would become the basis for Trajan’s granting of this favor. Should the favor be granted by the emperor, Voconius would be indebted not only to Trajan but also to Pliny, who will, in turn, be indebted further to Trajan.⁶ The broker, or mediator, at the same time incurs a debt and increases his own honor through the indebtedness of his client. Brokerage—the gift of access to another, often greater patron—was in itself a highly valued benefit. Without such connections the client would never have had access to what he desired or needed. This is especially apparent in the case of Pliny’s physical therapist, Arpocras, who gains both Roman and Alexandrian citizenship by means of Pliny, who petitions Trajan on his behalf (*Ep.* 10.5–7, 10). Pliny gives this local physician access to the emperor, the fount of patronage, which he would never have enjoyed otherwise. Brokerage could even intervene in the judicial process. Both Cicero⁷ and Marcus Aurelius (*Ad M. Caes.* 3.2) use their connections of friendship with a judge to secure favorable outcomes for their clients, on whose behalf they write.

The Social Context of Grace

We have looked closely and at some length at the relationships and activities that mark the patron-client relationship, friendship and public benefaction, because these are the social contexts in which the word *grace* (*charis*) is at home in the first century A.D. Today, *grace* is primarily a religious word, heard only in churches and Christian circles. It has progressed through millennia of theological reflection, developments and accretions (witness the multiplication of terms like “justifying grace,” “sanctifying grace” and “prevenient grace” in Christian theology, systematizing the order of salvation). For the actual writers and readers of the New Testament, however, *grace* was not primarily a religious, as opposed to a secular, word. Rather, it was used to speak of reciprocity among human beings and between mortals and God (or, in pagan literature, the gods). This single word encapsulated the entire ethos of the relationships we have been describing.

First, *grace* was used to refer to the willingness of a patron to grant some benefit to another person or to a group. In this sense, it means “favor,” in the sense of “favorable disposition.” In Aristotle’s words (*Rhetoric* 2.7.1 [1385a16-20]), “Grace [*charis*] may be defined as helpfulness toward someone in need, not in return for anything, nor for the advantage of the helper himself [or herself], but for that of the person helped.” In this sense, the word highlights the generosity and disposition of the patron, benefactor or giver. The same word carries a second sense, often being used to denote the gift itself, that is, the result of the giver’s beneficent feelings. Many honorary inscriptions mention the *graces* (*charitas*) of the benefactor as the cause for conferring public praise, emphasizing the real and received products of the benefactor’s goodwill toward a city or group. Finally, *grace* can be used to speak of the response to a benefactor and his or her gifts, namely, “gratitude.” Demosthenes provides a helpful window into this aspect in his *De Corona* as he chides his audience for not responding honorably to those who have helped them in the past: “But you are so ungrateful (*acharistos*) and wicked by nature that, having been made free out of slavery and wealthy out of poverty by these people, you do not show gratitude (*charin echeis*) toward them but rather enriched yourself by taking action against them” (*De Corona* 131).

Grace thus has very specific meanings for the authors and readers of the New Testament, meanings derived primarily from the use of the word in the context of the giving of benefits and the requiting of favors. The fact that one and the same word can be used to speak of a beneficent act and the response to a beneficent act suggests implicitly what many moralists from the Greek and Roman cultures stated explicitly: grace must be met with grace; favor must always give birth to favor; gift must always be met with gratitude.

Responding with Grace

As we have already seen in Seneca's allegory of the three Graces, an act of favor must give rise to a response of gratitude—*grace must answer grace*, or else something beautiful will be defaced and turned into something ugly. According to Cicero, while initiating a gift was a matter of choice, gratitude was not optional for honorable people, but rather an absolute duty (*De Offic.* 1.47–48). Receiving a favor or kindness meant incurring very directly a debt or obligation to respond gratefully, a debt on which one could not default.³⁶ Seneca stresses the simultaneity of receiving a gift and an obligation: “The person who intends to be grateful, even while she or he is receiving, should turn his or her thoughts to returning the favor” (*Ben.* 2.25.3). Indeed, the virtuous person could seek to compete with the giver in terms of kindnesses and favor, trying not merely to return the favor but to return it with interest like the fruitful soil that bears crops far more abundant than the seeds that were scattered on it.³⁷

Ingratitude is something to be avoided in itself because there is nothing that so effectually disrupts and destroys the harmony of the human race as this vice. For how else do we live in security if it is not that we help each other by an exchange of good offices? It is only through the interchange of benefits that life becomes in some measure equipped and fortified against sudden disasters. Take us singly, and what are we? The prey of all creatures. (*Ben.* 4.18.1, LCL)

Responding justly to one's benefactors was a behavior enforced not by written laws but rather “by unwritten customs and universal practice,” with the result that a person known for gratitude would be considered praiseworthy and honorable by all, while the ingrate would be regarded as disgraceful. There was no law for the prosecution of the person who failed to requite a favor (with the interesting exception of classical Macedonia), but, Seneca affirmed, the punishment of shame and being hated by all good people would more than make up for the lack of official sanctions.⁴² **Neglecting to return a kindness, forgetfulness of kindnesses already received in the past, and, most horrendous of all, repaying favor with insult or injury—these were courses of action to be avoided by an honorable person at all costs. Rather, gifts were always to be remembered, commemorated first of all in the shrine of one's own mind, and always to be requited with gratitude. The social sanctions of honor and shame, therefore, were important bulwarks for the virtue of gratitude and exerted considerable pressure in this direction.** As we consider gratitude, then, we are presented with something of a paradox. Just as the favor was freely bestowed, so the response must be free and uncoerced. Nonetheless, that response is at the same time necessary and unavoidable for an honorable person who wishes to be known as such (and hence the recipient of favor in the future). Gratitude is never a formal obligation. There is no advance calculation of or agreed on return for the gift given. Nevertheless, the recipient of a favor knows that he or she stands under the necessity of returning favor when favor has been received. The element of exchange must settle into the background, being dominated instead by a sense of mutual favor, of mutual goodwill and generosity.⁴⁸

Manifestations of Gratitude

“**Returning a favor**” could take on many forms, depending on the nature of the gift and the relative economic and political clout of the parties concerned. Cities or associations would show their gratitude for public benefactions by providing for the public recognition (honoring and increasing the fame) of the giver and often memorializing the gift and the honors conferred by means of a public inscription or, in exceptional cases, a statue of the giver or other monument.

A second component of gratitude that comes to expression in relationships of personal patronage or friendship is **loyalty to the giver**, that is, showing gratitude and owning one's association with the giver even when fortunes turn, and it becomes costly. Thus Seneca writes about gratitude that "if you wish to make a return for a favor, you must be willing to go into exile, or to pour forth your blood, or to undergo poverty, or,...even to let your very innocence be stained and exposed to shameful slanders" (*Ep. Mor.* 81.27). Wallace-Hadrill writes that despite the fact that, in theory, clients were expected to remain loyal to their patrons, in practice, if a patron fell into political trouble or if his or her fortunes began to wane, the patron's entourage of clients would evaporate.⁵¹ Such practice, however, was contrary to *the ideal of gratitude, according to which a person would stand by (or under) the person's patron and continue to live gratefully even if it cost the individual the future favors of others, or brought him or her into dangerous places and worked contrary to self-interest. The person who disowned or dissociated himself or herself from a patron because of self-interest was an ingrate.*

The principal of loyalty meant that clients or friends would have to take care not to become entangled in webs of crossed loyalties. Although a person could have multiple patrons, to have as patrons two people who were enemies or rivals of one another would place one in a dangerous position, since ultimately the client would have to prove loyal and grateful to one but disloyal and ungrateful to the other. "No one can serve two masters" honorably in the context of these masters being at odds with one another, but if the masters are "friends" or bound to each other by some other means, the client should be safe in receiving favors from both.

The Dance of Grace

Such mutually contradictory rules (forgetting and remembering, being silent and bearing witness, and the like) are constructed so as to keep the giver's mind wholly on what is noble about patronage (generosity, acting in the interest of others) and the recipient's mind wholly on what is noble for the client (namely making a full and rich return of gratitude for favors conferred). They are devised in order to sustain both parties' commitment to acting nobly within the system of reciprocity. The ultimate goal for these ancient ethicists, after all, was not perfect systematization but virtuous conduct. Grace, then, held two parties together in a bond of reciprocal exchanges, a bond in which each party committed to provide what he or she (or they) could to serve the needs or desires of the other. Though often profitably compared to a dance that had to be kept "grace-full" in a circle of giving and receiving, these relationships were far more than ornamental or recreational (as dances are). They formed the bedrock of society, a person's principal assurance of aid and support in an uncertain and insecure world."¹ (Source)

¹ deSilva, D. A. (2000). [*Honor, patronage, kinship & purity: unlocking New Testament culture*](#) (pp. 94–119). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

The Reasons for Questioning The Reliability of Josephus:

Many historians and scholars throughout history have asked, "How reliable is Josephus' work?" Let's consider some of the arguments.

- Josephus commonly exaggerated, embellished, and overstated his writings. Some historians point to the fact that he was overstating for dramatic purposes. For example, he says that so much blood was shed in Jerusalem that streams of gore extinguished the fires that burned. Although this is exaggerated, his point is clear!
- Josephus is not consistent with numbers. For example, he says Mount Tabor is "thirty stadia" (18,200 feet), when in reality the mountain is only 1,920 feet. Exaggeration of numbers is very common to authors of that era.
- In Josephus' *Jewish War* account of the Siege of Jotapata – specifically in his detailed description of the suicide lottery – the math does not add up in order to be a truthful explanation of the event. This dilemma with numbers is known today by historians as the *Josephus Permutation*.*
- Also, like other historians of his day, Josephus sometimes invented heroic speeches and put them into the mouths of his subjects, such as the patriotic oratory of Eleazer, the leader of the Jews atop Masada. Since the men who heard Eleazer were slain in the siege, and since Josephus wrote the account from Rome, he cannot possibly have had access to the full speech.

- **Josephus had an agenda.** Agenda: The reason “Josephus’” family name is Flavius is because he surrendered to the Roman general Vespasian, later Emperor Vespasian, of the Flavian Dynasty. After the end of the war he spent the rest of his life as comfortable prisoner in Rome, as part of the Flavian household - that would be the same family that included the emperors Vespasian and his son Titus, who had sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Second Temple.

In Rome, Josephus was granted citizenship & pension.

He had written an official history (Roman Version) of the revolt and was loathed by the Jews as a turncoat and traitor. As such, he had a vested interest in not disappointing his “captors,” and to present the Romans in the best possible light. He was a favorite at the courts of the emperors Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, and he enjoyed the income from a tax-free estate in Judaea. He had divorced his third wife, married an aristocratic heiress from Crete, and given Roman names to his children.

The head on his shoulders was very much dependent on how well his benefactors received his accounts. Therefore, he cannot be considered objective.

Josephus' Extra-Biblical Additions Uncritically Accepted:

Where's That in the Bible?

Josephus shares details about biblical people and places that don't appear in the Bible. Which of these claims have you heard, without realizing they came from Josephus? All the following are accepted uncritically:

- Herod the Great became King of Judea by the decree of Caesar Augustus (*Jewish War* 1.20.2).
- The girl who danced before Herod & requested John the Baptist's head was named Salome (*Antiq* 18.5.4).
- Herod sent John the Baptist to prison in Macherus, on the east side of the Dead Sea (*Antiquities* 18.5.2).
- Felix, the Roman governor who met Paul in prison and trembled at his words, had begged his Jewish wife, Drusilla, to divorce her husband so they could marry (*Antiquities* 20.7.2).

CAVEAT #1: JOSEPHUS IS NOT INSPIRED SCRIPTURE!

CAVEAT #2: JOSEPHUS WAS BIASED & ON RETAINER!

CAVEAT #3: JOSEPHUS WROTE ANSWERING CRITICS!

BOTTOMLINE, JOSEPHUS HAD BEEN CO-OPTED!

* The problem is named after Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian living in the 1st century. According to Josephus' account of the siege of Jotapata, he and his 40 soldiers were trapped in a cave by Roman soldiers. They chose suicide over capture, and settled on a serial method of committing suicide by drawing lots. Josephus states that by luck or possibly by the hand of God, he and another man remained until the end and surrendered to the Romans rather than killing themselves. This is the story given in Book 3, Chapter 8, part 7 of Josephus' *The Jewish War* (writing of himself in the third person):

However, in this extreme distress, he was not destitute of his usual sagacity; but trusting himself to the providence of God, he put his life into hazard [in the manner following]: "And now," said he, "since it is resolved among you that you will die, come on, let us commit our mutual deaths to determination by lot. He whom the lot falls to first, let him be killed by him that hath the second lot, and thus fortune shall make its progress through us all; nor shall any of us perish by his own right hand, for it would be unfair if, when the rest are gone, somebody should repent and save himself." This proposal appeared to them to be very just; and when he had prevailed with them to determine this matter by lots, he drew one of the lots for himself also. He who had the first lot laid his neck bare to him that had the next, as supposing that the general would die among them immediately; for they thought death, if Josephus might but die with them, was sweeter than life; yet was he with another left to the last, whether we must say it happened so by chance, or whether by the providence of God. And as he was very desirous neither to be condemned by the lot, nor, if he had been left to the last, to imbrue his right hand in the blood of his countrymen, he persuaded him to trust his fidelity to him, and to live as well as himself.

The details of the mechanism used in this feat are rather vague. According to James Dowdy and Michael Mays, in 1612 Claude Gaspard Bachet de Méziriac suggested the specific mechanism of arranging the men in a circle and counting by threes to determine the order of elimination. This story has been often repeated and the specific details vary considerably from source to source. For instance, Israel Nathan Herstein and Irving Kaplansky (1974) have Josephus and 39 comrades stand in a circle with every seventh man eliminated. A history of the problem can be found in S. L. Zabell's Letter to the editor of the *Fibonacci Quarterly*.

Josephus had an accomplice; the problem was then to find the places of the two last remaining survivors (whose conspiracy would ensure their survival). It is alleged that he placed himself and the other man in the 31st and 16th place respectively. – Internet Search
