Josephus and the Paradox of Traumatic History

The historiographer Josephus expresses a distinct interest in how historians should or should not write history, (e.g. *Against Apion* 1.6–59). This interest is evident in the first lines of the *Jewish War*, his earliest extant work. Here Josephus engages in polemical statements against the alleged inadequacies of competing accounts of the war, including the accusation that these unnamed historians were not present themselves for the events of the war as Josephus himself was (*War* 1.1–3). Josephus thus asserts that he writes from autopsy, a standard claim to historiographical authority (Marincola 1997: 63–86). He furthermore engages in a historiographical topos that dates back to Thucydides (1.1.2): he claims that the Romano-Jewish war was the "greatest" (μέγιστον) war ever known to humankind. The confluence of autopsy as the foundation of the historian's authority, and of the agonistic claim that the war that is the subject of one's monograph is the greatest of all time, puts Josephus in a remarkable position: having directly experienced profound violence by his presence in such a conflict, Josephus presents himself as traumatized by his experience. He claims that his emotions of grief and experience of suffering are manifest in the very writing of *War* itself, and will be perceptible to the reader (*War* 1.9, 11). Josephus further proclaims this intrusion of his own emotion into the work to be "contrary to the custom of history" (παρὰ τὸν τῆς ἱστορίας νόμον at 1.11). The historian thus raises a striking paradox: what is a historian to do if, as he has argued, it is his personal experience (autopsy) which generates his historiographical authority and veracity, yet that very experience was in fact traumatic and has engendered tremendous suffering in the author within a genre to which expression of such personal emotion from the author is not appropriate?

The "custom of history" which Josephus asserts he has transgressed is not the mere attempt on the part of the author to arouse emotion in the audience (here I do not wish to raise

the specter of "tragic history," long since laid to rest (Walbank 1955 and 1960)). It is clear from Marincola's analysis of Polybius' remarks on emotion in historiography that such emotion was meant to be directed at characters within histories (Marincola 2003: 292–302). There is no indication that Greek and Roman historians typically intended their audience to feel sympathy toward *themselves*. Thus it is not the presence of emotional language nor the attempt to engender feeling in the audience that constitutes his purported violation, but the fact that Josephus, in his authorial voice and speaking autobiographically, expresses the suffering of the characters of his history as also his personal suffering.

In this paper, I argue that the paradox of the opening of *War* constitutes a striking instance of a phenomenon observable elsewhere in Josephus' corpus: the fundamental identity of the historian with his work. Thus, in the historical-critical portion of *Apion*, Josephus observes no functional difference between the collective Jewish past as recorded in the Hebrew Bible, his own historiographical rendering of it in his *Jewish Antiquities*, and his status and historiographical credentials as the author of the *Antiquities*: an attack on one is treated as an attack on all. Whereas elsewhere in his corpus, the identity between author and historical text appears absolute, here in *War*, the conventions of the genre of historiography are inadequate for the full expression of the human experience of τὰ πράγματα. In Josephus' presentation, there exists a portion of his experience of the war that is outside of, beyond, and in excess of what is customary for the historian, but which has nevertheless intruded into the account against the author's will. The fact that Josephus has conformed so precisely to the conventions of Greek historiography (by his own presentation, he is the consummate authoritative historian at *Apion* 1.48–52) has created this intrusive surplus of feeling that cannot be contained within the very conventions of the genre. This explains his direct appeal to his audience to engage with his

history with a sort of filter in place: the events or facts (τὰ πράγματα) are the proper stuff of history, while grief belongs only to the person who wrote it (*War* 1.12). In an author who displays throughout his corpus such remarkable tensions in his relationship to the Greek historiographical tradition, it is paradoxically his conformity with its conventions that forces him to break from them in the opening of *War*.

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