

## Josephus and the Essenes —with an Appeal to Essenologists Everywhere

In chapter one of *The Essenes of Mount Arbel and Jerusalem*,<sup>1</sup> I bring together evidence from archaeological, historical and topographical observations to make the case for an Essene settlement at Mt. Arbel, comprising a male-only community in the Arbel Cave Village and, 1.7 kms to the southwest, a community of married Essenes in the ancient town of Arbel. Furthermore, I present literary clues in the Parables of Enoch (1 Enoch 37–71) linking that text to the Arbel Cave Village. Although the writings of Josephus are our main source of historical evidence for these findings, it is also true that Josephus never openly identifies Arbel, or Arbel Cave Village, as an Essene settlement. This clearly needs to be explained.

To begin with, Josephus does mention a local group that can be identified indirectly with the Essenes. He calls them “Herod’s like-minded” (τὰ Ἡρώδου φρονοῦντας) and reports some senior members were seized during the Civil War (38 BCE) and drowned in the Sea of Galilee (*Jewish War* 1.326; *Antiquities* 14.450). The perpetrators were most likely residents of Magdala, among whom there were many Hasmonean veterans and loyalists. This brief mention of “Herod’s like-minded” then resonates with the mention of a group called the “Herodians” in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, who were discussing the law with the Pharisees in Capernaum (Mk 3:6; 8:15 p<sup>45</sup>) and later interrogated Jesus in Jerusalem (Mk 12:13; Mt 22:16). The context makes it clear that they were a religious party, who, like the Pharisees and the Sadducees, were concerned with proper religious observance. Joan Taylor has convincingly identified the Herodians in the Gospels with the Essenes.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, the Essenes did not call themselves “Herodians”, and it is quite possible that this ‘nickname’ originated in King Herod’s reign, and then went out of use during the reign of his successors.<sup>3</sup> So, it is no surprise that, on account of unfamiliarity and disuse, no New Testament writers, other than Mark and Matthew, mention that name. Luke may have referred to the Essenes as the “pious” (εὐλαβής in Greek, חסיד [Hasid] in Hebrew, חסין [Hasin] in Aramaic, cf. Lk 2:25; Acts 2:5; 8:2; 22:12). We do not know how the Essenes of Arbel called themselves, but from *1 Enoch* (*IEn* 38:1; 46:8, 53:6, 62:8), it appears they referred to themselves the ‘Congregation’ (*haEdah*) or ‘The Congregation of the Righteous’ (*Edat haTzedikim*).<sup>4</sup> The Qumran Essenes, who called

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<sup>1</sup> John Ben-Daniel, *The Essenes of Mount Arbel and Jerusalem: Origins, History and Influence*, Mogilany, Krakow: Enigma Press, 2023; 7-35, available for private use at <https://www.newtorah.org/pdf/QM2023protected.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Taylor, *The Essenes, The Scrolls and the Dead Sea*, Oxford: OUP, 2012; 109-130.

<sup>3</sup> This Latinized nickname may have arisen from wordplay between Hordus (הורדוס), the Hebrew name of Herod, whose supporters would have been Hordusim, or Hordu'im (הורדויים), and the word Haredim (הרדים), the name of the pious sect mentioned in Is 66:2,5 and Ezra 9:4; 10:3, forerunners of the Hasedim. In Galilee, the gutturals H and H would have been pronounced the same. If true, this wordplay would imply the Essenes were also known as “Haredim” (for a description of this group, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Opening of the Sealed Book: Interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2006; 64-72).

<sup>4</sup> This term ‘congregation’ is found at *IEn* 38:1, 46:8, 53:6, 62:8, where it refers to a chosen community of righteous people, in a good sense. This is a more selective application of the term than we find in Scripture, where it usually refers to the House of Israel in general (esp in Ex and Nm). Except in CD 20:2-3, where it is used in a good sense, the *Damascus Document* applies this term specifically, in a bad sense, to a group of traitors and apostates, past and present, with little distinction between them (CD 1:12; 2:1; 8:9; 8:13=19:26). The term is used only once in the *Community Rule* (1QS 5:20), where it is used in a good sense, also in the *Peshier to the Psalms* (e.g., 4Q171 2:5). In the *Rule of the Congregation* for the messianic age (1QSa) it reverts to a uniformly good sense. So, although the term is generally used

themselves ‘Beit Yahad’ (‘House of Unity’) referred to them polemically as ‘Beit Peleg’ (‘House of Division’), indicating serious rivalry between the two groups.<sup>5</sup>

Josephus spent time as an adolescent with the Essenes, most probably in Jerusalem, and came to know them well (*Life* 10-11). He wrote more about the Essenes than the other religious ‘parties’ and, judging from his writings, he remained sympathetic to them all his life. His personal exposure to their teaching is evident in his detailed recollection of the 12 oaths taken by new members, which would not have been accessible to anyone except potential candidates. Except for their ‘awesome oaths’ of membership, backed by severe penalties, he may have become an Essene himself (*Jewish War* 2.139), instead of a Pharisee.

Just before the First Revolt, Josephus was appointed as the commander of the Jewish rebel forces in Galilee. In his autobiography, he relates how he supplied and fortified the Arbel Cave Village (*Life* 188; cf. *Jewish War* 2.573), and then assembled his supporters in the town of Arbel, when his position as commander, and his own life, were threatened by allies of the extremist John of Gischala convening in nearby Tiberias (*Life* 311). His choice of meeting-place indicates that the residents of Arbel supported his more moderate stance viz a viz the Romans, against that of the anti-Roman extremists from Gischala, Gabara and Tiberias, backed by a faction of leading men from Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, thanks to Josephus, we know that some Essenes fought in the First Revolt (66-70 CE). He mentions John the Essene, who commanded the Jews of the central region in the revolt (*Jewish War* 2.567). He also describes the torture and slaughter endured by the Essenes at the hands of the Romans, most likely following the defeat of the rebels in Jerusalem in 70 CE (*Jewish War* 2.152-153). The Essenes who had remained in Jerusalem during the First Revolt were treated as enemies by the Romans, in spite the fact that they had earlier been allies and supporters of King Herod. Although they were widely respected by other Jews, because of their piety, it is quite possible that there was some lingering resentment, owing to their support for King Herod and opposition to the Hasmonean dynasty, by whom they had been harshly persecuted.

Josephus wrote *Jewish War* and then *Antiquities* in Rome soon after the Revolt, between 70-95 CE, and his readers were mainly from the Roman upper classes. When Josephus was writing, the conflict was far from over, as evidenced in the next century by the Diaspora Revolt (War of Qitos 115-117 CE) and the Second Revolt (132-135 CE). Since some Essenes had participated in the First Revolt, and were therefore considered enemies by the Romans, Josephus would have avoided naming the locations of their surviving communities to prevent this information being used in reprisals against them. It is also quite possible that, like Hippolytus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, the Romans had confused the Essenes with the Zealots (*Refutatio omnium haeresium* ix. 26). If Josephus’ writings were the cause of reprisals, rightly he would have been accused of espionage and betrayal by fellow Jews.

The refusal of Josephus to specify the location of Essene communities can be seen in other contexts too. When he writes, “They populate no one city, but they are settled in great numbers in every town” (*Jewish War* 2.124, cf. Philo, *Hypothetica*, 11.1), he carefully avoids mentioning place names. Since he writes about the Essenes in the present tense, he is aware that many had survived the First Revolt, and it is highly probable that he knew where their main settlements were located. As we noted above,

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in a good sense in Scripture, DSS and Parables, there was a period in which it was used in a good sense in the Book of Parables (in self-identification) and in a very bad sense in the *Damascus Document* (for the traitors and apostates). We suggest this usage reflects the split which took place within the household of the Essenes, in Damascus, after the death of the Teacher (c. 130 CE) and reflects ongoing rivalry and polemics in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE.

<sup>5</sup> Ben-Daniel, *The Essenes of Mount Arbel and Jerusalem*, 61-64.

he had been to Arbel and Arbel Cave Village. He may have known about the Qumran community, but he never mentions it in his writing. Even though he mentions the Essene Gate in Jerusalem's city wall (*Jewish War* 5.144-145), he never refers directly to the presence of an Essene community in Jerusalem. His silence on the settlement of Essenes in Jerusalem and Qumran is so striking that to this day, scholars and archaeologists continue to raise doubts about their presence in these places. Their presence in Jerusalem can only be inferred from his description of the Essene Gate, the toilets (*Bethso*) near that gate, outside the wall, and from surviving archaeological structures such as communal *mikva'ot*.<sup>6</sup>

In the Eastern Galilee archaeological survey conducted by Prof. Uzi Leibner (1999-2004), there is indeed evidence of continuous and intensive settlement of the Arbel Cave Village from 100 BCE up to around 250 CE,<sup>7</sup> and in the town of Arbel from 120 BCE up until a catastrophic earthquake in 749 CE.<sup>8</sup> Due to their previous support for King Herod and for their heterodox binitarian writings centred on the exalted figure of Enoch/Metatron (on display in the *Hekhalot* literature), the post-70 CE Jewish leadership would have regarded the Essenes with suspicion and hostility, leading over time to their exclusion from the Jewish community as *minim* (heretics).<sup>9</sup>

Josephus and Philo of Alexandria were the only first-century writers to identify the Essenes as a major religious group in late Second Temple Judaism. Josephus was born in 37 CE and was raised in Jerusalem, Philo was born in c. 20 BCE, died c. 50 CE, and although he lived in Alexandria, he visited Jerusalem at least once, and probably more. Both Josephus and Philo would have had the opportunity for direct contact with the Essenes, most likely with their community in Jerusalem, which may explain how, independently of each other, they came to agree on the main characteristics of that group. The fact that neither mentions the precise locations of any Essene community should not surprise us, for the reasons stated above. By the time they were writing, in mid to late first-century CE, the Romans were in control of Judaea and the Essenes had taken the side of the nationalist factions. Judging by Pliny the Elder's description of the Qumran Essenes in his *Natural History* (*Hist. Nat.* 5.73), their celibate way of life was an object of amazement and bemusement.

Researching a past which has almost completely disappeared requires a special approach. Direct evidence is very rare, and indirect, or circumstantial, evidence is the norm. We should not expect to find inscriptions saying "the Essenes lived here",<sup>10</sup> but we may find utensils used by a scribal community, or infrastructure used by a religious community. Small items of information pointing in the same direction reinforce each other, so the sum, or cumulative effect, is more persuasive than individual items on their own. The notion that small findings and observations from different disciplines can be assembled to form a coherent picture of the whole is the basis of the Mosaic theory

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Chapter two in Ben-Daniel, *The Essenes of Mount Arbel and Jerusalem*, 37-72.

<sup>7</sup> Uzi Leibner, *Settlement and History in Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Galilee*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009; 239, accessible at <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/43969> (04.09.25)

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit. 262-265.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Reports About Christianity and Gnosticism*, Waco TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2012; 183-219; Peter Schäfer, *Two Gods in Heaven: Jewish Concepts of God in Antiquity*, Eng. trans. Allison Brown, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton Univ. Press, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> As did Louis H. Feldman (*Josephus and Modern Scholarship [1937-1980]*, 1984; 964), when he objected to the hypothesis of an Essene settlement on Mt. Zion, in Jerusalem, with an 'argument from silence', based on the fact that no inscriptions mentioning the Essenes had been found, despite the proliferation of archaeological excavations in the Old City of Jerusalem following the Six-Day War. He also argued that, if they had been present in any numbers during the siege in 70 CE, Josephus would have written about their role at that time, but he did not. The reason for the silence of Josephus is the subject of this essay, and is explained above.

of information gathering, and this is the method we employ with the Essenes.<sup>11</sup> Even small pieces of information with little or no probative value on their own can come to have significant evidentiary value when combined with information from other sources. Gathering data from different sources in order to build up a cumulative knowledge base is an intuitive mental process. So, it is not surprising that scholars in the past have compared Josephus' descriptions of the Essenes against the other main source of information on the Essenes, which is the sectarian literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in the caves near Qumran.

Although there are some differences between Josephus' reports on the Essenes and the sectarian writings in the Dead Sea Scrolls, there is also much in common.<sup>12</sup> For the majority of scholars, the comparison confirms the Qumran-Essene hypothesis, which holds that the people who settled in Qumran in the first centuries BCE and CE were Essenes of a certain faction, as represented by Pliny and the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>13</sup> The differences can be explained by identifying another group of Essenes who had separated from the Qumran faction and gone on to develop a different worldview and eschatology, while maintaining the same communal organization, ritual and discipline.<sup>14</sup> These were the Essenes described by Josephus and Philo and, as a rival congregation, they differed from the Qumran community on points of doctrine and interpretation, although they still identified as Essenes by taking the oaths of membership. Their differences were particularly evident in their stance towards Jerusalem and her Temple: the Qumran Essenes lived in the desert near the Dead Sea and excluded themselves from Jerusalem until the final war, while the mainstream Essenes lived in communities in many towns and villages throughout the Land of Israel, including Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup> However, owing to their common organization and practices, it is still true to say with Joseph Blenkinsopp and others, that the Dead Sea Scrolls provide the best available evidence to date, apart from Josephus and Philo, on the broader Essene movement in the Second Temple period.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, in the late 90's the situation described above was thrown into utter confusion by the interrogation of the personal motives and integrity of Josephus, our main source of information about the Essenes. The leader of this lengthy retrospective inquisition is the historian, Steve Mason. Upset by the way Josephus, whose reliability was widely acknowledged until the 90's, was being used 'uncritically' to confirm the Qumran-Essene hypothesis, Mason has insisted that "Josephus's account must first be understood in its own context before it can be mined for information about other matters".<sup>17</sup> He then describes a context in which, surrounded by Romans celebrating the defeat of the Jews, Josephus wanted to present the Jews in a favourable light by emphasizing the virtue of the

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<sup>11</sup> Ben-Daniel, *The Essenes of Mount Arbel and Jerusalem*, 1-6.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Todd S. Beall, *Josephus' Description of the Essenes Illustrated by the Dead Sea Scrolls*, SNTSMS 58, Cambridge: CUP, 1988; Kenneth Atkinson and Jodi Magnes, 'Josephus's Essenes and the Qumran Community', *JBL* 129, no. 2, (2010) 317-342.

<sup>13</sup> John J. Collins offers a helpful overview of the Essenes in his *Beyond the Qumran Community: The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Grand Rapids MI/ Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2010; 122-165, esp 122-23; 142-156.

<sup>14</sup> Florentino Garcia Martinez, 'Qumran Origins and Early History: A Groningen Hypothesis', *Folia Orientalia*, Tome XXV, 1988; 113-136; Gabriele Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of the Ways between Qumran and Enochic Judaism*, Grand Rapids MI/ Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> It is known that the Qumran Essenes had cut themselves off entirely from Jerusalem and her Temple, until the future coming of the messiahs and final war (1QM 1:3). On the contrary, the Essenes who settled in Jerusalem had come to "an arrangement" with the Temple authorities, which allowed them certain recognition, but forbade them from entering the inner court, which in any case they considered defiled. Presumably they were free to preach and prophecy in the outer courts, and to offer their own purification sacrifices (red heifers) in the Essene Quarter (*Antiquities* 18:19; Nm 19:1-22), as proposed by Albert Baumgarten ('Josephus on Essene Sacrifice', *JSJ* 45/2, 1994; 169-183).

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Opening the Sealed Book*, 146.

<sup>17</sup> Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community*, 123.

Essenes, and highlighting them as the best representatives of Jewish society at that time. In his *Jewish War*, this was achieved by portraying the Essenes as exemplary Jews whose discipline matched that of the Spartans, whom the Romans greatly admired:

“But no group other than the Essenes, not even the priesthood as a body, so perfectly illustrates the characteristics of the nation. These are “men’s men,” legionaries of the soul, engaged in the serious pursuits of the virtuous life: disciplined, courageous, perfectly just, and contemptuous of the pleasures as much as the fears that drive ordinary people. It is no accident that the great Essene digression comes to the *War*, a work targeted precisely at improving the post-war image of the Judean national character. The Essenes carry the torch lit by the Hasmoneans in the story’s opening paragraphs”.<sup>18</sup>

Evidently realizing that he was accusing Josephus of writing Jewish propaganda, rather than history, Mason stops and backpedals:

“Given that Josephus offers the Essenes as exemplary Judeans, to what extent has he manipulated the real group, or whatever he had in mind as the real group, to serve his own aims?”<sup>19</sup>

What follows is a lame attempt to crawl back the accusation, based on the fact that 1) Josephus did not impose a priestly identity on the Essenes, which Mason would have expected if it was pure fiction, and 2) Josephus treatment of the Essenes is, to a certain extent, backed up independently by Philo and Pliny. He therefore concludes “we should take this agreement seriously”.<sup>20</sup> Seriously or not, Mason’s reluctant support for the historical value of the reports of Josephus, Philo and Pliny comes at a cost, which he calls “the historical problem of the Essenes”. This basically means that he is unable to discern any resemblance between the Essenes described by Josephus and the Essenes of Qumran, and is therefore unwilling to recognize the latter as Essenes:

“the *basic mentalities* of the groups appear to be different. And it is not merely a problem of description; it is also one of motivation. The historian must try to explain this: If the lost X (the Essenes) were the people of the sectarian scrolls, why would such elite statesmen as Philo and Josephus have independently and repeatedly turned to them, a group so deeply at odds with their own amply attested values, to carry the torch of national character?”<sup>21</sup>

By subordinating the historical value of Josephus’ histories and focusing on their literary and rhetorical qualities, and by magnifying the differences between that source and the sectarian writings among the Dead Sea Scrolls, Mason discovers a contradiction—a contradiction that not only negates the existence of Essenes at Qumran (“the lost X”), but also decouples the Essenes of Josephus from the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The good news is that the contradiction Mason has identified is not a contradiction at all, for it has been shown—as noted above—that the Essenes of Philo and Josephus differ in some respects from the Essenes of Qumran, specifically in mindset and worldview, but still have much in common in terms of organization, ritual and discipline.<sup>22</sup>

Although Mason himself affirms Essene existence, on the basis of the independent testimonies of Josephus and Philo, he has severed it completely from Qumran and opened the door to extreme

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<sup>18</sup> Steve Mason, ‘Essenes and Lurking Spartans in Josephus’ *Judean War: From Story to History*, *Making History: Josephus and the Historical Method*, ed. Zuleika Rodgers, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 110, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007; 219-261, quote from 251.

<sup>19</sup> Op. cit. 252.

<sup>20</sup> Op. cit. 252.

<sup>21</sup> Steve Mason, ‘The Historical Problem of the Essenes’, in *Celebrating the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Canadian Contribution*, ed. Peter W. Flint, Jean Duhaine and Kyung S. Back, Early Judaism and Its Literature 30, Atlanta GA: SBL, 2011; 201-251, quote is from 248; see also Mason’s ‘Essenes and Lurking Spartans in Josephus’, 254.

<sup>22</sup> For a balanced review of the similarities and difference see Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community*, 2010; 142-156.

doubt and denial regarding the historical veracity of every other aspect of Josephus' historical testimony. He leads the way by accusing Josephus of inventing the existence of married Essenes, because he cannot imagine "how the marrying group could have been integrated with the others".<sup>23</sup> He insists Josephus must have freelanced here, because he was quite inventive and wanted to neutralize Roman sarcasm.

Subsequently, other scholars have jumped on the bandwagon, claiming that the Essenes did not exist and that Josephus invented everything about them.<sup>24</sup> More seriously, some scholars have dismissed Josephus' claim to have had personal contact with the Essenes in late adolescence (*Life* 9-11), thereby denying his role as a primary historical source on the Essenes, and reducing it to that of a simple compiler of others' reports, or a mere storyteller. The effect of Mason's 'open season' on the historical veracity of Josephus' histories has been to shatter the widespread recognition of their reliability and inhibit scholars from referring to the Essenes at all. Essene research is now an active minefield for some, and an untouchable academic taboo for others!<sup>25</sup>

In defence of Josephus, and in an attempt to restore basic trust in his writings, it is necessary to point out that key points of his description of the Essenes are independently confirmed by Philo of Alexandria, as well as by passages in the Damascus Document (CD) and Community Rule (1QS).<sup>26</sup> Regarding his claim to have stayed with the Essenes (*Life* 9-11), it was customary for selected adolescents to become postulants for up to 2-3 years, before committing to join the community (1QS 6:13-23). In view of the vow taken by members "to reveal nothing to outsiders, even though tortured to death" (*JW* 2.141), the unique information that Josephus provides on the Essenes could only have been obtained as a temporary insider, thereby confirming the claim that he spent a number of months

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<sup>23</sup> Steve Mason, 'The Historical Problem of the Essenes', 2011; 245-246, maintained up to the present day, cf. Mason, 'Interpreting Josephus Contextually: Composition, Audiences, Messages, and Meaning'; in *From Josephus to Yosippon and Beyond*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, eds. Carson Bay, Michael Avioz, Jan Willem van Henten (open access), Leiden/Berlin: Brill, 2024; 36-39. The topography of the Essene settlement on Mt. Arbel answers Masons' perplexity on this issue: the Arbel cave village, carved into the base of a cliff in rugged and remote terrain, accommodated a male community numbering about 120 members, while the town on the plain of Mt. Arbel, 1.7 kms distant, was settled by the married community of several hundred members, who worked in the surrounding fields to support themselves and the male community. Able-bodied members of the male community would have participated in the agricultural and production processes (mainly flax and grain). The two communities were complementary and symbiotic, working together though living in separate communities (John Ben-Daniel, *Essenes of Mount Arbel and Jerusalem*, see n.1). The same relationship seems to have pertained between Qumran (all male) and 'En el-Ghuweir (mixed) and between the Essene Quarter in Jerusalem (all male) and Beit Safafa (mixed), according to the contents and burial style of cemeteries in those areas (Pesach Bar-Adon, 'Another Settlement of the Judaean Desert Sect at 'En el-Ghuweir on the Shores of the Dead Sea', *ASOR*, no. 227 [Oct 1977] 1-25; Boaz Zissu, "Qumran Type" Graves in Jerusalem: Archaeological Evidence of an Essene Community? *DSD*, vol. 5, no. 2 1998; 158-171; these findings are not negated by those at Khirbet Qazone, because it is reasonable to assume that the Essene burial style was later adopted by local Bedouin tribes, for reasons of purity or corpse preservation).

<sup>24</sup> Rachel Elijor was among the first to deny their existence in 2009, because she finds no record of this group in later rabbinical writings (12.03.2009, [www.bibliahebraica.blogspot.com/2009/03/curiouser-and-curiouser-no-essenenes.html](http://www.bibliahebraica.blogspot.com/2009/03/curiouser-and-curiouser-no-essenenes.html) and subsequent posts on 17.03 and 18.03.2009).

<sup>25</sup> This is not an exaggeration. One leading Scrolls-scholar even called for a 'moratorium' on the use of the word 'Essene' in connection with the Dead Sea Scrolls, because he considers Josephus and Philo to be so unreliable (J.J. Collins, *Apocalypse, Prophecy and Pseudepigrapha*; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2015; 85). As a result, scholars stopped referring to the Qumran community as Essenes, calling them either the "Qumran sect" or "Dead Sea sect" instead.

<sup>26</sup> See n. 22.

as a young postulant with the Essene community.<sup>27</sup> This makes him a primary historical source of information on the Essenes, comparable to the Qumran scrolls, such as CD and 1QS.

In the situation of defeat and demoralization after the First Revolt, it is not difficult to understand why Josephus should want to promote the Essene way of life, in order to appeal to the Roman sense of virtue and to raise the morale of the surviving Jews. History-telling is propaganda only if it embraces deception. As the Torah itself shows, history-telling can have a moral purpose and message, so long as basic morality is respected and lies are not wittingly told.

On this point, Josephus was a priest who diligently observed the laws of his people, one of which was “do not bear false witness” (Ex 20:16; Dt 5:20; Lev 19:11; Prov 6:16-17). As a conscientious Jew, who aspired to observe the Torah and maintain the highest standards of morality, it can be assumed that Josephus avoided intentional lies and deception in his historical writings. On a historical level, there is now sufficient archaeological evidence to confirm much of what Josephus described in his account of the First Revolt, a fact that can be easily grasped by reading the text of his *Jewish War* with a commentary by competent Israeli historians and archaeologists.<sup>28</sup> In reaction to the current academic over-reach, however, it is worth reflecting on the arrogance of denying the testimony of an eye-witness from antiquity, without reliable documentary evidence to the contrary. At most, it is legitimate to question or challenge some disputed fact, but outright denial is unacceptable and tendentious.

At the end of her chapter on the history of Essene research, Joan Taylor has a sobering message for the super-sceptical academic, who is content with nothing less than direct, ‘smoking gun’, evidence:

“Almost nothing can be proven to be true, but it does not follow that in that case it must be false. In these descriptions [of the Essenes], it is fundamental to recognize that we are not in the realm of *simple* truth or falsehood; the truth our authors tell need not be whole. In other words, I will predicate a discussion on Essene identity with a conditional statement: *if* what the classical authors say is true, yet partial (selective) and shaped by their rhetorical interests, then what can we say about Essene identity? I read historical actuality as conditional on a resounding *if*. Given that much of the evidence from literature in antiquity is improvable in terms of its veracity, to take a sceptical view that is therefore unknowable, or not worth trusting, is arbitrary, since equally it cannot be proven to be untrue. In a discussion where no proof can be presented for or against historical actuality, and where rhetoricity does not invalidate historicity, the *if* prerequisite remains a given. *Where, however, it becomes apparent that other evidence happens to cohere with the presentation of our ancient sources, then this creates a somewhat more persuasive picture in terms of history*”.<sup>29</sup> (Italics mine)

After many years of archaeological discovery in Israel, Josephus has proven himself to be a reliable historical witness for biblical research, especially, but not only, for events and places he personally experienced. His writings continue to be of immense value in historical, literary and archaeological research. Even Mason admits this in his essay on ‘How Reliable is Josephus?’, where he concedes “Nevertheless, it should not surprise us if Josephus turns out to be accurate, by and large in the description of the world he knew”, but then cynically adds, “Even if his writings are historical

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<sup>27</sup> Josephus would have joined around 55 CE, at the age of 16-17 years. If, as is most likely, Josephus joined the Essene community in Jerusalem, he would have experienced Essenes of a different faction from those of Qumran, judging by their accommodation to the Temple and to life in Jerusalem (see n. 15).

<sup>28</sup> E.g., *Josephus: The Jewish War*, by Gaalya Cornfeld (general editor), Benjamin Mazar and Paul Maier (consultant editors), published in English by Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1982.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, *The Essenes, the Scrolls, and the Dead Sea*, 20-21, i.e., cumulative evidence is the most we should expect, and is what we should aim to obtain as an interdisciplinary team.

novels, playing fast and loose with the facts, we would expect them to refer to real situations, institutions and events”.<sup>30</sup> Given that the Essenes are not “real situations, institutions or events”, it is clear that Mason includes the Essenes in both categories, those about which Josephus knew and can be considered reliable, and also those with which Josephus is presumed to have ‘played fast and loose’. In other words, Mason has been so successful in confusing scholars about what is reliable and what is not in Josephus’ account of the Essenes, it is not surprising that scholars have chosen to avoid the subject altogether. We need to rescue those histories from the dizzy heights of ivory towers, and take them back into the field, as they did in the 1980’s and 90’s, to read Josephus *in situ*. Only then will we be able to recover what was once a widespread acknowledgment of the reliability of Josephus’ histories.<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, it is ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ that the Essenes existed as a third religious party in late Second Temple Judaism and that, contra Mason, some Essenes were married, as described in Josephus’ *Jewish War* (2.160-161) and affirmed in the Damascus document (CD 7:6-9).<sup>32</sup> His topographic and historical record have a reliable track record.<sup>33</sup> We should continue to investigate the relationship between the Essenes of Josephus, who were based Jerusalem, and the Essenes of Qumran, who had excluded themselves from Jerusalem, for we are clearly dealing with two different factions of the same parent group. I would suggest, therefore, a careful reconsideration of the Groningen, Enochic-Essene, and Arbel-Essene hypotheses, and the refinement of these as more information becomes available.

We also need to reopen the discussion on the history of the Essenes: their origin in Damascus, through the covenantal union of (1) the Enochian Jews of Damascus, originally from Babylonia and loyal to the prophet Ezekiel, many of whom were priests or Levites without ancestries, therefore unqualified for service in the Jerusalem Temple, and including some who may have served at the temple at Dan, restored by Ptolemy II Philadelphus c. 260 BCE (cf. 1En 6:6, 13:7-9) and (2) the newly exiled Teacher of Righteousness and his followers fleeing to Damascus from the ruling ethnarch and newly appointed high priest Jonathan, c. 152 BCE. Those who separated from the Teacher and stayed with Jonathan in Jerusalem were aptly called Pharisees, that is, ‘Separatists’. In the Greek-speaking ‘land of Damascus’ (cf. CD 6:5, 6:19, 7:14-15, 7:18-19, 8:21=19:34, 20:10-13), the new covenant group, which united the local Enochians with the exiled followers of the Teacher, were called ‘Essenes’, as *essenoi* and *essaioi* are the Greek transliterations of the Aramaic *hasin* and *hasayya* (cognates of *hasidim*, which means ‘the pious’). Vermes famously objected that *hasin* and

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<sup>30</sup> Sidebar to ‘Will the Real Josephus Please Stand Up’, at <https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/will-the-real-josephus-please-stand-up/> (accessed 01.08.25); also at Mason, Steve. “Will the Real Josephus Please Stand Up?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 23.5 (1997): 58–61, 63–65, 67–68.

<sup>31</sup> Mirroring the increasing skepticism concerning the historical value of Josephus’s writings in western universities, there seems to have been an increasing acceptance and celebration of his work in the Hebrew-speaking Academy, cf. Daniel R. Schwartz, ‘From Masada to Jotapata: On Josephus in Twentieth-Century Hebrew Scholarship’, *A Companion to Josephus*, eds. H.H. Chapman and Z. Rodgers, Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2016; 419-439.

<sup>32</sup> And, incidentally, consistent with the findings at Arbel and the Arbel Cave Village, which Josephus had certainly visited, see n. 23 above. For an authoritative exposition of the evidence surrounding Essene celibacy, see Joseph M. Baumgarten, ‘The Qumran-Essene Restraints on Marriage’, *Studies in Qumran Law and Thought*, STDJ 138, eds R.A. Clements and D.R. Schwartz, Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022; 109-119.

<sup>33</sup> This was brought home to me again recently on a visit to the newly excavated pilgrim ascent from the Siloam Pool to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. One can still see the places where Roman soldiers tore up the paving stones covering the drain in order to kill c. 2,000 refugees hiding there, described precisely by Josephus in his *Jewish War*, 6.429-430.

*hasayya* were only found in Palmyrene Aramaic, but this only goes to confirm the origin of the Essenes in Syria (which Philo also notes), somewhere in ‘the land of Damascus’.

What united these two groups, apart from their new covenant and common Babylonian origin, appears to have been the opportunity, created by the success of the Maccabean revolt, for Temple reform and rebuilding according to the plan set out in the Temple Scroll and Book of Jubilees. The Teacher died c 130 BCE and by 100 BCE his most loyal followers, who called themselves ‘Beit Yahad’ (House of Union), had returned to Israel and settled at Qumran, having separated from the group they polemically called ‘Beit Peleg’ (House of Division). Archaeologists date the Arbel Cave Village to 100 BCE, so we have proposed that the rival group, ‘Beit Peleg’, settled in Arbel at that time, where they became neighbours to a community of Pharisees exiled by John Hyrcanus around 120 BCE. These Pharisees were led by the exiled vice president of the Sanhedrin, Nittai the Arbelite, whose name suggests he was the founder of the town of Arbel (m. Avot 1:6-7; m. Hagiga 2:2). If this reconstruction holds up, then the exiled Pharisees and the Arbelite Essenes would have coexisted as neighbours for at least 25 years, until the Pharisees were restored to their positions of authority by Queen Salome Alexandra, in 76 BCE.

It would be good also to discuss the literary output of the Arbel community, especially the Parables of Enoch, and its relationship with John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth, the Q scribe and John of Patmos. It is quite possible that, in its early stages, this community also produced the Apocalypse of Weeks, the Epistle of Enoch, the Testaments of the 12 Patriarchs, and later saw the development of Hekhaloth literature. It may explain why there was an early Jewish tradition that ‘Redemption begins at Arbel’ (due to its location on the boundary between Zebulun and Naphtali and thus a party in the messianic prophecy of Is. 9:1-7), why Jesus began his public mission here and why the Jews who wrote Sefer Zerubbabel in the early 7th century CE located the appearance of the Messiah and the final battle on Mt. Arbel. There is much to explore and discuss!

Finally, we should return to talking about the Essenes unapologetically, as they did in the 1980’s and 90’s. A whole population of mainstream Essenes is waiting to be rediscovered, and we are only just beginning to examine their archaeological and literary remains at Mt. Arbel and on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. If discussion about this topic is not acceptable in university departments, then we should start to wonder whether there is an attempt to erase the Essenes, as the rabbis once did, and rewrite history to fit a partisan agenda, or worse.

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