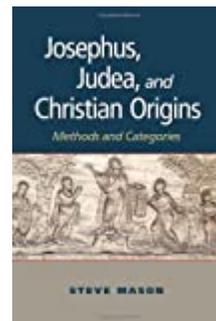




**Steve Mason.** *Josephus, Judea, and Christian Origins: Methods and Categories.* Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009. xx + 443 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59856-254-5.



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## Judea in the First Century: Rethinking Our Categories, Methods, and Assumptions

A collection of essays from a first-rate scholar, Steve Mason, is a bit like an all-star team in professional sports: each installment is bound to offer scholarship of the highest caliber, but the overall success of the collection depends on how well the essays âplay together,â the extent to which they exhibit a unity worthy of scholarly consideration. Without question, each of his contributions in the present volume, many of which already have been published, is top-notch. Even in those few cases where the thesis proves less than persuasive, the research is thorough, the writing crisp and lively, the argumentation meticulous, and the assertions responsible. The essays are also sufficientlyâif not completelyâunified in theme, purpose, and effect, so as to recommend their appearance together in a single volume. As the title indicates, the ostensible objective of the essays is to reevaluate, and ultimately to unmoor, some of the reigning methods and categories that currently inform scholarly research on Josephus, Judea, and Christian origins.

Part 1 treats Josephus. The category in the crosshairs is âhistory,â and the method under review is the allegedly

naïve reliance of most ancient historians on Josephus as a transparent âwindow to real eventsâ (p. 42). Chapter 1 amounts to a programmatic introduction in which Mason chips away at the four most common scholarly strategies for culling historical information from Josephus: the winnowing method, corroboration from archaeology, source criticism, and reading âagainst the grain.â According to Mason, who draws on insights from the so-called linguistic turn in historical research, none of these approaches enable one to penetrate the discursive artfulness of Josephusâs narratives in order to secure reliable historical data, particularly when Josephus constitutes the only witness. Chapters 2-4 then explore that âartfulness,â examining various aspects of ancient history writing that no doubt shaped Josephusâs productions: audience (chapter 2), figured speech (chapter 3), and what Mason calls âcounterpointâ (chapter 4). Once one acknowledges these elements in his craft, Mason proposes, Josephus can no longer be used as a unilateral source for reconstructing history.

In many respects, what Mason has done to Josephus

mirrors what John Knox famously did to Acts more than a half century ago, when he exposed the artifice in Acts and its resultant inadequacy as an independent witness to the life of Paul. And, reactions to Mason will no doubt resemble those posed to Knox, who recalls being asked, "If we cannot rely confidently upon Acts, what is left us? We would not be able to write a life of Paul at all." [1] Without Josephus, our only witness to so many events in first-century Judea, much of that period, too, would be dislodged from the historical ken. So be it, Mason would say, for fear of agnosticism does not justify improper use of sources. This is not to say that Mason disavows any and all historical value in Josephus's works. Where alternate lines of evidence are available, for example, Josephus can indeed contribute to historical reconstructions, and, even when they are not, he can still be used to gain social-historical knowledge about the coloration of first-century Judea or the experience of a Judean aristocrat in Flavian Rome (p. 43). Historians wishing to go beyond this level of investigation, however, henceforth will have to lodge substantive responses to Mason's work before proceeding with the standard methods for utilizing Josephus.

Part 2 deals more specifically with people and phenomena in first-century Judea and the methods and categories typically used to study them. The last three chapters examine the Pharisees (chapters 6-7) and the Essenes (chapter 8). Chapter 8 is especially provocative, as it launches a formidable salvo against the entrenched hypothesis that equates the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls with the Essenes described by Pliny and Josephus, among others. On the one hand, Mason suggests, the evidence from Pliny that allegedly locates the Essenes near Qumran is less corroborative than most suppose, while, on the other hand, Josephus's descriptions of the Essenes bear all the markings of a highly stylized effort to idealize Judean virtue, which limit their usefulness in historical reconstruction. This two-pronged argument is not likely to dispel the Essene Hypothesis by itself, as the uncanny similarities between the scrolls and Josephus's descriptions remain. In the least, however, it should spur thoughtful scholars to reevaluate that hypothesis and caution them against equating the scrolls and the Essenes too facily.

The first installment (chapter 5) in part 2 should also engender considerable debate. There, Mason joins the growing array of scholars who have questioned the viability of "religion" as a useful category for interpreting ancient phenomena. Like many before him, Mason concludes that "religion" as we understand the term—a

discrete category of human experience—did not exist in the ancient world. The *Ioudaioi* of antiquity, accordingly, should not be viewed as a religious group, but rather as an *ethnos*, a people or ethnic group, best translated by the English "Judean." Similarly, *Ioudaismos* should be seen not as a comprehensive religious system, "Judaism," but as the peculiar act of Judaizing, of adopting (or readopting) various traits or customs of the Judeans. I imagine scholars will discern a few dents in Mason's argument. Some may not be satisfied with his rendering of *Ioudaismos* in certain ancient texts (e.g., 4 Mc 4:24-26; Gal 1:14); others will wonder why "Jew," as opposed to "Judean," fails to capture the primarily ethnic character of the ancient *Ioudaios/Iudaeus*. Current Jewish prayers, practices, rituals, and self-expression, in many cases, belie the notion that "Jew" has lost its ethnic edge or its inherent connection to the ancient land of Israel. Many of today's Jews pray regularly for a return to the land and/or the rebuilding of the Temple, send their children there on "birthright" trips, and say "next year in Jerusalem." They also reckon their identity according to birth and routinely speak of "peoplehood." This is not to say that "Jew" is necessarily superior to "Judean" as a translation of the ancient terms; no doubt each has advantages and disadvantages. In any case, the debate over "Jews," "Judeans," and "Judaism" is likely to continue for many years, and Mason has established himself as an important voice in the discussion.

Part 3 is the weakest link in the collection. The third essay (chapter 11) provides a worthy assessment of Jewish groups and institutions in Luke-Acts and Josephus, but it belongs in part 2 rather than part 3, which has the putative aim of examining Christian origins. Chapters 9-10 do explore Christian origins specifically, but their theses are less persuasive. In the former, Mason proposes that it was Paul, rather than Jesus or the disciples, who coined the term *euangelion*, "gospel," and used it to describe his unique mission among the Gentiles. While Mason is correct to point out that scholarship has yet to account adequately for the proprietary tone in which Paul speaks about the gospel, I suspect many readers will be skeptical of his proposal, not only because it parts ways with the widely accepted interpretation of the crucial passage in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, but also because its somewhat Hegelian rendering of the legacy of Paul's gospel in the second and third Christian generations will be viewed by some as overly simplistic or reductionist. In the latter chapter, Mason suggests that Paul's primary audience in Romans was a "Judean-Christian" one, not the largely or exclusively Gentile one supposed by most

scholarship. Even though the epistle explicitly identifies its recipients as Gentiles, Mason thinks the "Judean concerns" constituting the bulk of the letter make a Judean audience more likely (p. 305). This approach, however, may itself represent a category error or methodological stumbling block, for there is ample reason to believe that Gentile-Christians, as much as the Judeans, cared about the topics pursued in Romans. The faithfulness of God, for example, which Paul examines in Romans 9-11, was no doubt a concern for Gentiles as well as Judeans, while Paul's epistle to the Galatians reveals that Gentiles, no less than Judeans, cared about issues of Abrahamic descent (Rom 4) and the status of the Torah (Rom 7).

All told, then, Mason's anthology puts forth a series of provocative and stimulating essays that promise to invigorate scholarly debates regarding the methods and categories used to investigate first-century Judea. Whether or not scholars in this field ultimately find his various proposals compelling, none should proceed to discuss the Pharisees, the Essenes, or the gospel, or to reconstruct history on the basis of Josephus, without seriously weighing the evidence and the arguments he provides.

#### Note

[1]. John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul*, rev. ed. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), 31.

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