JOSEPHUS ON THE ESSENE.
THE SOURCES OF HIS INFORMATION

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The accounts of the Essenes in Philo and more especially Josephus have received a good deal of scholarly attention in recent years. In the great majority of cases this attention has been focused on the parallels between these accounts and the Dead Sea Scrolls. In a paper delivered at the Josephus Colloquium at Trinity College, Dublin in September, 2004, Steve Mason objected strongly to this procedure on methodological grounds. He argued, quite correctly, that Josephus’ account must be understood in its own context before it can be mined for information about other matters. In this regard, his argument is in line with recent trends in the study of history-writing, which tend to emphasize the literary character of historiographical works. He also objected to the very widespread tendency to “correct” Josephus in light of the Scrolls, on the assumption that the latter are primary Essene documents.

The thrust of Mason’s argument is that the account of the Essenes is thoroughly Jospehan, part of the historian’s rhetorical and apologetic presentation of Judaism. He does not suggest that Josephus invented all of this material out of whole cloth (although he does suggest this in the case of the passage on “marrying Essenes” in War 2.160–161). Rather, he assumes that Josephus wrote on the basis of his personal knowledge of a contemporary group of Jews. In this he goes against a long tradition in Josephan scholarship, which holds that Josephus, and also Philo, depended on literary, ethnographic, accounts of the Essenes,

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1 See e.g., Beall, 1988. This is also true of my own discussion, Collins 1992, 619–26.
2 Mason 2007. See also Mason, http://orion.mscd.huji.ac.il/orion/programs/Mason00–1.shtml. Part of this essay (roughly, the latter half) appeared under the same title in Mason 2000, 434–67. Page references in this essay are to the printed version. See now also Mason 2008, 84–131, which appeared after this article had gone to press.
3 E.g., White 1973 and White 1978.
4 E.g., Sanders 1992, 341–79. Examples could be multiplied. Mason’s objection was anticipated by Ory 1975, 75.
5 In personal correspondence, Mason insists that he is not denying the possibility that Josephus used sources, to supplement his knowledge of the Essenes, but only the possibility of delineating them.
written for a Gentile readership, possibly by Gentile authors. Mason is not alone in his dissent from this tradition, but he has given the strongest arguments against it to date. At stake is the degree to which Josephus can be assumed to know what he was talking about. Mason by no means suggests that everything Josephus has to say about the Essenes is reliable. The account dovetails too neatly with his Tendenz in the rest of his writings. But it will make a difference to our estimation of his reliability whether he wrote from his own observation or relied on second-hand accounts by others who may have had little if any first-hand knowledge of the sect.

**Pre-Josephan accounts of the Essenes**

*Philo and Pliny*

Josephus was not the first writer in antiquity to formulate an account of the Essenes, nor even the first Jewish author to do so. Philo Judaeus, who flourished about half a century earlier, has left us two passages describing a group that he calls “Essaeans,” *Quod omnis probus liber sit*, 75–91, and *Hypothetica* 11.1–8 (*Apologia pro Judaeis*). Josephus also uses the name “Essaean” with reference to individuals (*War* 1.78; 2.113, cf. *Ant.* 13.311; 17.346 with reference to the Essene prophets, Judas and Simon; *War* 2.567; 3.11, John the Essene), and in *Ant.* 15.371–379, he begins by referring to “those we call Essaeans” but goes on to speak of “Essenes” in the passage about a seer named Menahem. There is no doubt that Philo uses the name “Essaean” to designate a sect or religious community, and Josephus appears to use the term in this way at least in *Ant.* 15. The two forms of the name, *Essaioi* and *Essenoi*, are simply variants, representing two common Greek adjectival endings, and no great significance can be attached to the variation.

The two passages in Philo are the oldest extant accounts of the Essenes. It appears that Philo also wrote a longer account that has not survived. At the beginning of his treatise on the *Therapeuta*