

Josephus and the Essenes of Mt. Arbel

In chapter one of *The Essenes of Mount Arbel and Jerusalem: Origins, History and Influence* (J. Ben-Daniel, Mogilany, Krakow: Enigma Press, 2023), we combine evidence from archaeological, historical and topographical observations to make the case for an Essene settlement at Mt. Arbel. Although the writings of Josephus are our main source of historical evidence, it is also true that Josephus never openly identifies Arbel, or the 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 they 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 p⁴⁵) 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 (*The Essenes, The Scrolls and the Dead Sea*, Oxford: OUP, 2012; 109-130).

So, although Josephus does not mention the Essenes of Arbel, he does identify a group of Herod supporters (“Herod’s like-minded”) around the Sea of Galilee during the Civil War (40-37 BCE), and in the Gospels they reappear in Capernaum and in Jerusalem as a religious group called the “Herodians.” Recalling that the first Jews to populate lakeside Galilee, especially Magdala, were the Hasmoneans (c. 100 BCE), and that loyalty to the Hasmonean dynasty endured for generations in that area, a name indicating support for Herod, the scourge of the Hasmoneans, was a pejorative, if not actually a personal liability. To be sure, the Herodians did not call themselves “Herodians”, and it is quite possible that this ‘nickname’ not only originated in Kings Herod’s reign, but also went out of use during the reign of his successors. So, it is no surprise that, on account of unfamiliarity and disuse, no other New Testament writer mentions that name. Luke may have referred to the Essenes as the “pious” (εὐλαβής in Greek, יוֹסֵפִי in Hebrew, יוֹסֵפִי [*Essene*] 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* (*1En* 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*).

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. 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), 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 first Revolt (*Jewish War* 2.567). He also describes the torture and death, the Essenes endured 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* 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 Jewish Revolt (132-135 CE). Since some Essenes had participated in the first Jewish Revolt, and were therefore considered enemies by the Romans, he would have avoided naming the locations of their surviving communities, to prevent this information being used in reprisals against them. More grievous for Josephus, however, would have been the accusations of espionage and betrayal coming from 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), 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. 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, he never refers 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.

In the archaeological survey conducted by Prof. Uzi Leibner, there is indeed evidence of continuous and intensive settlement of the Arbel Cave Village from 100 BCE up to around 250 CE (*Settlement and History in Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Galilee*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009; 239) and up until the 7th century CE in the town of Arbel (op. cit. 262-265). Due to their previous support for King Herod and for their heterodox Binitarian writings (Hekhalot literature), the post-70 CE Jewish leadership may have regarded the Essenes with suspicion and hostility, leading over time to their exclusion as *minim* (heretics). This would have been another reason to avoid stating their current locations in his writings.

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