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# Josephus and the New Testament

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According to Batto the Priestly writer used the Babylonian combat myth of *Enuma elish* to advance his theology of monotheism. The Priestly writer reworks the story of creation by replacing the floundering God of the Yahwist with a perfect one. Thus the view of the fall replaces the Yahwist's view of God slowly coming to terms with his flawed creations. The Priestly writer uses the combat myth as the foundation for his account of Israel's captivity in Egypt and their crossing of the Red Sea. Both are seen as having cosmic significance. Yahweh's victory over Pharaoh as depicted in the dividing of the Red Sea was actually a reworking of the primeval myth of Yahweh's victory over the water of chaos as evident in both the creation and the flood stories.

Batto's book is presented in a clear fashion. He keeps his reader informed of both the content and the development of his argument by presenting the data from which his conclusions are drawn and by summarizing these conclusions at the end of each chapter, building on them as the book develops. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in the development of ancient Israelite religion in general, and to those who are interested in the primeval and exodus stories in particular. This book contributes to our understanding of these stories and helps to place them within the context of the ancient Near East.

The main disappointment is the absence of any discussion on the implications for both the believer and the scholar of viewing myth as a medium of revelation. For those who view history and myth as antithetical and for those who have little background knowledge of the Babylonian myths used in the analysis, Batto's conclusions may be disturbing and perhaps even offensive.

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## **Josephus and the New Testament**

Steve Mason

Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992

248 pp. U.S. \$9.95

The New Testament has been the object of intensive scrutiny for centuries. The drive to understand the fundamental text of Christianity has meant that nearly every angle has been tried, nearly every scrap of evidence pressed into service. It seems strange, then, that arguably the most important extra-biblical writer for understanding the NT has never until now had a book for general readers relating his work to the NT itself. The writer is the first century Jewish historian Josephus; the book is *Josephus and the New Testament*, and it was worth the wait.

Steve Mason, Associate Professor of Humanities at Toronto's York University, presents here a reliable, innovative, and highly readable guide to the writings of Josephus and his importance for understanding the NT. Josephus, who was born in the year 37 CE and died about the year 100, claims an aristocratic pedigree. He was active in the war of the Jews against Rome (66–73 CE) first as a general on the Jewish side. Later, having defected to the enemy, he acted for the Romans in the siege of Jerusalem. Josephus soon enjoyed the patronage of the Roman emperor, Vespasian, and wrote a history of the war with Rome the *Jewish War* (= *War*). His account was thoroughly contextualized, beginning with the earlier (successful) revolt of the Jews against the Seleucids (167 B.C.E.), and thus traverses the period of Jesus' lifetime and the beginnings of Christianity. Josephus also wrote a vast history of the Jewish people from creation to his own day the *Antiquities of the Jews* (= *A.J.*) in 20 "books" (Bks. XII–XX covering the time from Alexander the Great to the Jewish War), as well as an account of his life (*Vita*) and a polemical work known as *Against Apion* (= *Ag. Ap.*).

It is not a simple matter to know whether or how far Josephus can be trusted. He seems to have been a slippery customer, as his defection to the Romans suggests (a fascinating story in its own right); he even makes a point of parading his deceptions. Yet even this datum has its ambiguity, for if his deceptions strike us as reprehensible, he (and his readers, we must assume) finds in these details demonstration of his resourcefulness! The question of Josephan credibility has usually been discussed fact by fact: is Josephus here or there to be trusted? Mason argues that this approach is deeply flawed, turning Josephus's large corpus into a mere grab-bag of facts, too easily distorted. Rather, we should begin with a thorough understanding of Josephus's reasons for writing each of his works, for even if he appears at times disingenuous, he nonetheless has clear theses that are relentlessly pursued.

In the *War*, for example, Josephus has a very tricky job on his hands. On the one hand, he has to write as a Jew who has alienated his fellow Jews; he can to some extent redeem himself in this history of the conflict with Rome. On the other hand, Josephus writes not simply as a Jew, but as "Flavius Josephus", enjoying the patronage of the imperial Flavian family in Rome. But Josephus excels at squeezing through the cracks between the rock and the hard place. As Josephus constructs his history, the picture emerges of a few "tyrants" among the Jews who incite the peace-loving populace to war. The Romans, on their part, are depicted as acting with restraint and even become the caretakers of the Jewish cult. Thus Josephus can account for the war, acquit the vast majority of Jews of willing participation, and place the Romans on "God's" side, all in one fell swoop! The whole of this history, then, must be read with this purpose in mind: otherwise one inevitably distorts the evidence. This "wholistic" approach to Josephus's writings is a hallmark of Mason's work.

Mason deftly introduces the reader to Josephan scholarship, and to Josephus's life and writings, always keeping the methodological focus clear.

Only after having approached Josephus on his own terms does Mason turn to look at the light Josephus's writings can shed on the NT. He first examines groups prominent in both Josephus and the NT (Herod and his family; Roman governors; Jewish high priests; the Pharisees and Saducees), and then looks at briefer notices in Josephus on three key figures: John the Baptist, Jesus, and James, the brother of Jesus. Despite the minimal interest of Josephus in these figures, they have attracted the greatest attention on the part of scholars (and provided the motivation for Christian scribes to preserve the writings of this Jewish traitor!). Mason moves with confidence through the complex arguments that surround these texts, and offers persuasive and independent interpretations. Finally, Mason looks at the special case of the relationship between the writings of Josephus and the writings of "Luke" (Luke-Acts) in the NT. Mason sets out a plausible case for supposing that "Luke" in some way "knew" and was influenced by Josephus's writings.

There is a powerful subtext that runs through this book. Mason makes a forceful case for the "wholistic" handling of Josephus; the same has to be true of the NT itself. If it is illegitimate to pry "facts" out of Josephus, it is equally misguided to pry "verses" out of the NT and to understand them apart from their larger literary context. But familiarity to this degree with NT writings should probably not be assumed of Mason's intended audience. Rather, this volume offers incentive to read the NT writings with greater integrity, as well as those of Josephus. Mason's own readings offer stimulating examples of how this process can deepen one's understanding of the biblical text.

The book is rounded off with maps, charts, tables, illustrations, and indices. Each chapter concludes with notes and suggestions for further reading so that one is pointed beyond Mason's own works to Josephus, the NT itself, and a larger world of scholarship. This volume is well suited to adult church study groups and pastors' libraries, as well as to undergraduate and seminary courses on the NT or early Judaism. Although this is a work of "popularization", it is a fine example of the genre, and professional scholars will find time spent with Mason's work rewarding. Finally, in a day of escalating book prices, the publisher should be commended for making it so affordable!

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