

From the Herodians to Hadrian

The Shifting Status of Judean Religion in Post-Flavian Rome

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Introduction

This article builds on the work of scholars who have attempted to theorize the complex and shifting negotiations of “Jewish” or “Judean” and “Christian” as categories of self-identification and opposition with a view to key historical developments that occurred between the Judean War and the Bar Kokhba Revolt.¹ In particular, I suggest that, despite the considerable tolls of the war, it created a pretext for widespread interest in the religion of Judeans—at least certain forms, namely ones rooted in the exegesis of Judean texts, especially for prophetic or esoteric purposes—and for people claiming expertise therein.² The

1. To be clear from the outset, I am not using “Judean” and “Christian” in an essentializing way, to denote distinct ethnic or religious identities, but rather to capture either notional expectations that Roman audiences held about these populations or else the discursive constructions of such categories by Justin Martyr and similar writers. For further explanation of the former use, see note 2.

2. Throughout this article I prefer the language of “Judean” and “Judean religion” to “Jewish” and “Judaism” in order to reframe the evidence I consider in terms more comparable to how Roman audiences, defined broadly, perceived and engaged the religious practices, skills, actors, and institutions of other foreign peoples. “Judean” has gained traction in recent years insofar as it foregrounds geographic and ethnic connotations of *Ἰουδαίος*/*Iudaeus* in contexts where such connotations eclipse the religious valences the term might otherwise carry, and which are primary in “Jew.” Some of these insights arise from Steve Mason’s important 2007 article (“Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism”) in which he draws attention to the pronounced ethnographic dimension of “Judean” in many writings of the Greco-Roman period, particularly ones written by or for non-Judeans. I am persuaded by Mason’s suggestion that using “Judean” in certain instances promotes a more precise understanding of how ancient peoples organized their knowledge of the world and particular peoples or groups, although I do not share his view that the term “religion” is inapplicable to antiquity (pp. 481–82). Indeed, for present purposes I find “Judean” useful precisely because this language evoked a suite of cultural features associated specifically with Judea, of which religious practices and the Jerusalem temple were a central part. “Judean” thus points to Judea in a way that “Jewish” does not, at a time when geography was central to how Romans *imagined* the religious practices, institutions, and artifacts (including texts) that they understood to emanate from particular regions, regardless of where the latter were actually encountered. Since I aim to redescribe the activities of self-authorized experts in the particular wisdom traditions, writings, and religious practices associated with Judea, as Roman audiences would have wielded such categories, “Judean” serves as an important reminder of how non-Judeans would have recognized these figures. I am not setting Judean experts

favorable status of anything Judean in these decades has been overshadowed, and understandably so, by the events of the Judean War and the Flavians' role in the destruction and decommissioning, respectively, of the temples in Jerusalem and Leontopolis, among other factors. Notwithstanding, the Flavian period holds important implications for the heightened, and not wholly negative, profile of Judean writings and their specialized interpreters at the end of the first century, as well as Christian outgrowths of this specific form of religious activity in the second.

Against this backdrop, I examine Bar Kokhba's revolt as an event that precipitated a shift in the status of Judean religion among Roman audiences, and with this, the more pointedly adversarial positions toward Judeans that begin to appear in "Christian" writings of the mid-second century. Whereas the latter have been read as symptomatic of Christianity's move away from Judaism in light of its increasingly gentile profile and the dilemma posed by Bar Kokhba's alleged messianic pretensions, I redescribe this anti-Judean rhetoric as a tandem effort on the part of self-identifying Christians to distance their religious offerings from problematic connotations of Judean-ness, while also laying claim to exclusive interpretive authority over authoritative Judean writings.³ While such

in absolute contrast to other Judean religious actors or phenomena; rather, I am proposing yet another dimension of an increasingly differentiated picture of Judean religion, in my sense, and one that is comparable in its diversity to the assorted actors, groups, and institutions apparent in our evidence for other examples of foreign religion attested throughout the empire. See also Mason, "*Philosophiai*: Greco-Roman, Judean and Christian;" Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*; Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of Early Christians*.

3. In my usage, the term "Judean writings" does not correspond to a particular body of literature and could, without qualification, refer to anything written in Judea (the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Babata archive, and so forth) while excluding most writings that would eventually become part of the biblical canon. Although most of the texts I have in mind are, in fact, those of the Hebrew Bible, I prefer "Judean writings" to "biblical literature," "Scripture," or "LXX" for several reasons. One is simply a desire to avoid anachronism in a period for which we do not know what exactly constituted Greek collections of these writings. More importantly, I wish to include within my category any writings that a given Judean expert held to be sacred or authoritative, not only ones that would become canonical—or even non-canonical texts that are nevertheless well known (e.g., Enochic literature)—but also ones about which we know nothing but that were of no lesser religious value to those who enlisted them (e.g., the books of Solomon, whence Eleazar the exorcist derives his wisdom about *daimones* in Josephus, *A.J.* 8.44–49). It is also the case that my terminology resembles the language that many Judean and non-Judean writers used to refer to the texts they found to be holy, oracular, or otherwise authoritative (e.g., "the holy books" or "the priestly writings of the Judeans"). The task of locating specialists in Judean religion within a wider field of similarly self-authorized actors requires that we reconcile the writings they utilized, and the manners in which they used them, with the kinds of writings and textual practices that are attested for non-Judeans in this context. "Judean writings" aligns more closely with literary corpora—Sibylline Oracles, Chaldean Oracles, Orphica, Hermetica, the books of Hystaspes, and so forth—employed by other freelance experts for any number of purposes: divination, prophecy, mythmaking, incantations, and so on. Thus, while this language may be somewhat imprecise, it is no more so than those other terms, which encompass a broad range of texts and textual applications.

efforts may predate Bar Kokhba, the revolt created an opportunity, and maybe also a necessity, for stronger strategies of differentiation. Setting these developments within a wider, competitive field of religious activity both localizes them among particular kinds of religious actors and also provides fresh comparanda for the negotiation of ethnic categories or ethnically coded practices among other participants in this sort of religious activity.

Judeans in the Religion of Freelance Experts

In order to frame the investigation that follows, allow me to briefly summarize a recent book in which I argue for the expansion and diversification of the religion of freelance experts in the first two centuries of the Roman Empire.⁴ By “freelance” I intend to capture any self-authorized purveyor of specialized skills, teachings, and related services who drew upon such abilities in the pursuit of status and prestige, and even more transparent forms of profit. Unlike the officiants of civic temples whose religious authority was a matter of institutional affiliation, self-authorized experts were responsible for generating their own recognition, legitimacy, and perceived value by offering services that purportedly exceeded ordinary religious benefits.

There are many indications that from the early decades of the empire these religious actors grew increasingly influential, more diverse with respect to the skills or methods in which they claimed expertise, and more global in the foreign trappings of their wisdom and practices.⁵ The same sources bear witness to an escalation in both the frequency and severity of efforts intended to counteract their influence, particularly throughout the first century CE.⁶ And while the full landscape of freelance experts active in the early Roman Empire included specialists in philosophy, medicine, jurisprudence, and rhetoric, I am most interested in experts in religion, that is, ones who directly enlisted in their practices gods and similar beings (*daimones*, divine *pneuma*, or spirits of the dead), including astrologers, who typically held anthropomorphic understandings of celestial bodies and their relevance to human affairs.⁷ That being said,

4. Wendt, *At the Temple Gates*.

5. See Wallace-Hadrill, “The Augustan Transformation of Roman Knowledge.” I am inclined to think freelance experts also increased in number, but with due caution given the relative scarcity of earlier evidence.

6. See Cramer, “Expulsion of Astrologers from Ancient Rome”; Ripat, “Astrologers at Rome”; Wendt, “Christian Martyrdom and the Religion of Freelance Experts.”

7. The status of “religion” as a meaningful category for antiquity has likewise been the subject of much recent debate: e.g., Nongbri, *Before Religion*; Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*. I am well aware of these critiques and do not employ “religion” uncritically in a manner that simply replicates the baggage of the modern category. Rather, I understand religion to be one area of social life consisting of practices that were imagined to involve the direct participation of gods and other divine beings. See Wendt, *At the Temple Gates*, esp. 12, 31–34.

the boundaries between these putative areas were porous and also secondary to deeper field dynamics that all freelance experts negotiated: the challenges of constructing one's own authority and legitimacy; competition; the problematic connotations of interest and profit; and opportunities for niche forms of prestige, for instance, through writing and intellectual demonstrations.⁸

Given the dramatically changing territory and population demographics of the early empire, as well as the networks of trade and connectivity that enabled its administration, it is unsurprising that a large number of participants in the specialist phenomenon were foreigners who capitalized on interest in wisdom, teachings, rites, and techniques perceived to be novel or exotic among Roman audiences. Moreover, a number of conditions—both those cultivated consciously as part of the Roman imperial project, and also those that arose circumstantially through voluntary and involuntary migration and the increasing heterogeneity of cities throughout the empire—promoted familiarity with and interest in foreign peoples, as well as their distinctive cultural practices and institutions. Inhabitants of the Roman world were broadly acquainted with such concepts, of foreign religion in particular, and they seem to have presented opportunities for complex and strategic acts of identification. Indeed, many specialists utilized ethnic or provincial caricatures to their advantage by claiming expertise in skills, practices, wisdom traditions, and artifacts (including texts) that were strongly associated with a particular people or region. We inherit numerous examples of specialists who operated independently of existing institutions—established cults, public and private temples, voluntary associations—and appealed to or even exaggerated their foreignness in order to gain recognition as legitimate purveyors of offerings framed within a given ethnic or geographic idiom.⁹

This exotic dimension of freelance expertise is particularly relevant to theorizing later Christian diversity insofar as Judeans appear regularly among other purveyors of ethnically coded skills, types of knowledge, practices, and paraphernalia,¹⁰ or else in contexts that were deeply resonant of this sort of

8. See Rawson, *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic*; Eshleman, *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire*.

9. This is not to deny that freelance experts cooperated or overlapped with other religious phenomena in complex ways. The evidence suggests that some formed networks with one another, while others attempted to establish groups with regular contours and institutional characteristics; others still had relationships with existing religious groups or temples. There are several examples of experts who maintained positive and regular relationships with religious institutions in Rome, the most notable case being regular collaboration between the temple of Asclepius on Tiber Island and freelance doctors who often treated patients there. For this evidence, see Renberg, "Public and Private Places of Worship in the Cult of Asclepius at Rome."

10. By "ethnic coding" I mean the range of practices that were strongly associated with certain peoples or regions for particular audiences, irrespective of how faithfully such associations resembled religion in native contexts. See, e.g., Scheid, "*Graeco Ritu*"; Parker, "Indian Commodities and Roman Experience."

religious activity, for instance, expulsions, proscriptions, and other legislative incidents.¹¹ In most cases the apparent freelance status of the Judeans in question is overlooked on the assumption either of authorial bias or else that they were “proselytizers” acting on behalf of a larger corporate entity, Judaism or a Jewish community. Whereas scholars have tended to discount sources that depict Judeans as diviners, wisdom instructors, and exorcists, to take this evidence seriously on its own terms locates some Judeans within a phenomenon that is well attested for specialists in other foreign offerings, thus counteracting the expectation that the former were religiously unique.

In certain contexts “Judean” even seems to function as an ethnic term connoting expertise in the fairly regular assortment of practices for which Judeans seem to have been especially well known—exorcism, prophecy, dream interpretation, divination or wisdom instruction from the Judean writings—not unlike how “Chaldaean” was virtually synonymous with astrology, or *magus* denoted expertise in Persian wisdom and religious skills until the end of the first century, when its semantic range broadened to encompass any kind of freelance religious actor.¹² Given the innovative tendencies of many freelance experts, I suspect that these shifting taxonomies—that is, the renegotiation, expansion, or dilution of ethnic categories as they operated within this particular context—correlate with the geographic and cultural expansion of the empire, as well as increasingly rife competition among experts capable of offering comprehensive programs that comprised a number of appealing practices framed within different ethnic idioms. I would provisionally suggest that “Judean” underwent comparable processes of ethnic decoding with respect to the precise range of practices and skills that the term implied in the context of religious expertise, particularly in the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba revolt, when such connotations became especially fraught.

Many of the Judean experts that appear in sources from the imperial period—those penned by non-Judean authors, as well as the works of Philo and Josephus—somehow linked their authority, teachings, and other practices to the famed Judean writings. The role of these texts might range from notional or symbolic appeals to the identification and interpretation of written prophecies to even more technical exegesis. I am most interested in the latter two applications, but wish to note that in this regard Judean experts were not alone. The past decade has witnessed a surge of interest in literary interpretation employed in the context of religious activity, foremost in the work of Peter T. Struck.¹³ These practices were predicated on a shared attitude toward certain

11. See Wendt, “A Rereading of Judean Expulsions from Rome”; Wendt, *At the Temple Gates*, 87–95.

12. See Rives, “*Magus* and its Cognates.”

13. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*. See also Konstan, “Introduction,” xi–xxx; Fitzgerald, “Myth, Allegory, and the Derveni Papyrus,” and “The Derveni Papyrus and Its Relevance for Biblical and Patristic Studies.”

writings, namely, that they were divinely inspired, harbored concealed knowledge or mysteries, and could be elucidated through skillful exegesis, often in conjunction with the aid of divine beings. The interpretation of such texts thus had grander consequences than mere literary criticism: the secrets they encoded pertained to the gods and their decipherment operated as a form of divination, albeit one that entailed a number of preconditions—literacy, education, deep familiarity with particular kinds of writings, and often the ability to produce new ones.

Intellectualizing religious experts—among whom I would include such assorted figures as the author of the Derveni papyrus, the authors of the Hermetica, the authors of some Pythagorean pseudepigrapha, and the apostle Paul—are evident already in the late classical world; yet they seem to have flourished in Roman times, when many applied their interpretive skills to ancient writings culled from the empire's diverse territories or even farther afield. Although wisdom traditions or literary corpora were often couched in exoticism, recent scholarship has emphasized that many books and teachings that were presented as Persian, Egyptian, Judean, and Chaldean reflected a common intellectual milieu.¹⁴ Since intellectualizing practices and texts transected ethnic or geographic specificity, it is unsurprising that rivalries among writer-intellectuals with similar skills and interests likewise crossed putative ethnic or geographic boundaries. Nevertheless, rivalries were the most acute among specialists of like ability operating within the same ethnic idioms and claiming interpretive authority over the same texts.

It is important to appreciate the extent to which Judean texts and their specialized interpreters were at home in this broader phenomenon of literary divination.¹⁵ There are many indications that these texts were at least familiar, if not also appealing, to Roman audiences from the earliest decades of the empire. Some scholars have argued for their literary influence on famous Latin poets such as Virgil, which would suggest fairly broad awareness of Judean writings, at least among the producers and consumers of other texts.¹⁶ Alternatively, in his biography of Augustus, Suetonius recalls that upon assuming the office of Pontifex Maximus, the emperor confiscated whatever prophetic writings were in private circulation at Rome, some of which were attributed to the Sibyl, while others, some two thousand of them, were either anonymous, or else attributed to authors of little repute.¹⁷ That the production and interpretation of such prophetic corpora fell within the purview of freelance experts is corroborated in a number of sources, and there are also indications that Judean oracles might

14. E.g., Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy*, 60–98.

15. So I argue in Wendt, "Galatians 3:1 as an Allusion to Textual Prophecy."

16. Horsefall, "Virgil and the Jews"; Bremmer, "Virgil and Jewish Literature."

17. Suetonius, *Aug.* 31.1.

have been included in the category of prophetic texts confiscated on these occasions.¹⁸

Without a doubt, the best evidence for the relationship between freelance expertise and literary exegesis more generally, and undertaken within a Judean idiom specifically, occurs in the Pauline epistles. Elsewhere I have redescribed Paul as a freelance expert in Judean religion, one who, like other participants in this form of religious activity, did not inherit legitimacy by virtue of his social status or relationship to an existing religious institution.¹⁹ Hence, his challenge was to locate himself both intelligibly and also exclusively in a competitive field of specialized offerings, a twofold prerogative that he pursued by demonstrating facility with multiple skills and practices for which first-century specialists were known. In particular, Paul presents himself to his audiences and seems to be recognized by them as a credible authority on religious practices associated with Judeans, as well as certain kinds of intellectual practices that were not mutually exclusive with Judean expertise but gestured beyond that frame of reference.²⁰ At the same time, he labors to differentiate his own authority and program from those of similar actors and offerings, especially Judeans, but also non-Judean experts whose benefits resemble the ones Paul promises to his audiences (e.g., philosophers and their techniques for self-mastery).

With respect to the first concern, gaining recognition, Paul adopts tactics consonant with the evidence for other experts laying claim to a particular ethnic or geographic specialty, in this case Judean. He speaks authoritatively about law observance, dietary restrictions, and circumcision; he alleges to have undergone dedicated training in ancestral teachings, even aligning himself with a specific interpretive group by claiming to be a Pharisee in matters of the law; he cites or references prophecies from Judean writings that he interprets in light of his teachings about Christ; he offers allegorical exegesis of episodes from Israelite or Judean myth; and he alleges the ability to perform any sign or wonder, even if he refrains from doing so. Also in keeping with Judean experts are Paul's persistent efforts to forge a connection with illustrious figures from Judean tradition, especially Moses. Even if they differ at the level of particulars from the offerings of other Judean experts, the elements of Paul's religious program trade on expectations about Judean religion

18. Justin alleges that, by the second century, death was decreed for anyone caught with books of (Persian) Hystaspes, the Sibyl, or the Judean prophets (*1 Apol.* 44.10–13), while Porphyry relates that the law of the Judeans, a common metonym for any Judean texts, flourished throughout the Roman world from the early imperial period onward (Augustine, *Ep.* 102.8).

19. See Wendt, *At the Temple Gates*, esp. 146–89.

20. Of course, the roles of Judean religious expert and writer-intellectual were not mutually exclusive. However, Paul's practices would have had multiple resonances among his audiences, depending on their own skills and reference points; some might have been more attuned to his intellectual demonstrations than his Judean-ness.

that were familiar and widespread among Roman audiences, the foremost of which was intimate familiarity with the inspired writings at its core. In Rom 3:1–2 he affirms the oracular character of these texts and also acknowledges that Judeans are inherently beneficial or skillful on account of possessing them. Although he goes on to explain that a “hardening” (πώρωσις; 11:25) has come upon some that prevents them from interpreting these oracles to the same ends as he, Paul grants that they have been chosen by God to be the principal stewards and exegetes of his prophecies.

In light of the considerable interest that accompanied Judean writings in the first century, an interest that, I suggest momentarily, only grew in the Flavian period, it is fitting that Paul appeals on no fewer than thirty-one occasions to what is written, to the authority of the law and the prophets, and to things foretold through the prophets in the holy writings. The preponderance of these phrases occurs in Romans, where he also makes the most explicit claims about having identified and explicated oracles hidden in these texts. The indispensability of Judean writings, or at least the traditions they contained, for communicating the significance of his practices is underscored by Paul’s highly specific and purposive exegeses of myths about well-known protagonists—especially Adam, Abraham, and Moses—that serve to explicate fundamental elements of his salvation scheme.²¹ While the content and application of his interpretations might have been somewhat novel, he was hardly unique among first-century Judeans in adducing literary mysteries, prophecies, and eschatological narratives from this literature, or, for that matter, in receiving messages from God through revelations, dreams, or other methods of divination. Yet, Paul’s basic recognition and credibility as an expert in Judean religion, not to mention his exegetical authority, were inseparable from his ethnicity in a way that would no longer be true for many second-century interpreters of these texts.

Regardless of the history of Judean writings at Rome in the early part of the first century, the reputation of their oracular character and potency must have been bolstered considerably by the role they were said to have played in both the events of the Judean War and the dynastic transformation that occurred in its wake. Regarding the former, Josephus reports that Judean rebels had been provoked in part by interpreting an ambiguous oracle in their holy writings to mean that one from their country was about to become the king of the world.²² Of course, he notes with satisfaction, many wise men were led astray concerning its interpretation since the oracle referred not to a Judean but rather to Vespasian, as Josephus himself correctly ascertained. Tacitus, Suetonius, Cassius Dio, and Appian reproduce the tradition about this prophecy gleaned

21. For Paul’s mythmaking, see Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*; Schellenberg, “Does Paul Call Adam a ‘Type’ of Christ?”; Stowers, “Kinds of Myth, Meals, and Power.”

22. Josephus, *B.J.* 6.310–13.

from the priestly writings of the Judeans, with the latter two mentioning Josephus by name.²³

From a Roman perspective, then, it appears that Judean writings were viewed as oracular resources on a par with the Sibylline books and other prophetic corpora the Romans had allegedly amassed in their state collection.²⁴ I have even raised the possibility that the copy of the law that served as the parade item of *spolia* in the Flavian triumph was incorporated into the collection of prophetic writings curated within the temple of Apollo Palatinus, or else its adjacent library.²⁵ That the scrolls met with such a fate is plausible in light of how they were widely recognized to have predicted Rome's new dynastic arrangement. And while the prominence of Egyptian religion in Flavian ideology has been noted by many, Judea lent as much if not more religious legitimacy to the imperial family, even if the exact mechanisms of legitimation were à propos of each ethnic idiom: signs issued at an oracular healing sanctuary and interpreted by Basilides, an Alexandrian priest of Sarapis, on the one hand, and dream interpretation, literary divination, and the pronouncements of Josephus, on the other.²⁶

In the absence of a differentiated picture of Judean religiosity, it is inevitable that the Flavians' destruction and decommissioning of the temples in Jerusalem and Leontopolis amounted to a calculated dismantling of Judaism as a whole.²⁷ The matter stands to be enriched, however, by consideration of a more complex landscape of Judean religion, one that includes the activities of freelance experts as well as the widespread recognition of Judean texts as sources of religious wisdom and prophecies. While the Flavian emperors might have struck strategic blows against a particular form of Judean religion—civic institutions in or associated with Judea—this did not stop them from simultaneously enlisting the prophecies of Josephus, a Judean of priestly ancestry, as well as Judean oracles, among other divine signs that corroborated Vespasian's acclamation.²⁸

23. Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13; Suetonius, *Vesp.* 4.5–6; Cassius Dio, 66.1.1–4; Appian, 11.16 *apud* Zonaras.

24. The references are scattered and include Livy, 25.23; Servius, *Aen.* 6.72; Lactantius, *Div. Instit.* 1.6.12. Writers who include a Judean Sibyl among those of other regions or cities seem to presume as much (Aelian, *VH* 12.35; Pausanias, *Descr.* 10.12.9; Origen, *C. Cels.* 7.3).

25. As opposed to the imperial residence, a scenario that implies the texts were regarded as mere war booty. See Wendt, "The Fate of the Judean Writings in Flavian Rome."

26. For the Flavians' interest in Egyptian religion, see Henrichs, "Vespasian's Visit to Alexandria"; Beard, "The Triumph of Flavius Josephus," 557. To the extent that Judean religion receives any attention in discussions of Flavian ideology, the characterization is negative and bound up exclusively in considerations of military legitimacy. See Wendt, "The Fate of the Judean Writings in Flavian Rome," 103–4.

27. Martin Goodman, e.g., concludes that the Flavians' war "waged on Judaism" was a permanent feature of their propaganda (*Rome and Jerusalem*, 432).

28. For arguments about the civic focus of the Flavians' actions, see Rives, "Flavian Religious Policy and the Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple."

Although Judean experts appear throughout the first century of the empire, one can imagine how a renewed focus on Judea, and Judean divination, in the mid- to late-first century fomented interest in Judean religion that had already existed at Rome for some time. The public displays of the Flavian triumph and architectural spaces, such as the *Templum Pacis*, that proclaimed the new imperial dynasty were visible reminders of Judean culture, stimulating interest in Judean religion.²⁹ Nor should the presence of Herodian royals, who resided at Rome for much of the first century, be underestimated as a potential catalyst for interest in things Judean. Diana Kleiner and Roger Beck have advanced similar arguments about Cleopatra and the royal family of Commagene, respectively, whose sojourns at the capital stimulated enthusiasm for *aegyptiaca* and the figure of Mithras.³⁰ Josephus reports frequent and favorable dealings between the Herodian and Julio-Claudian royals and, on occasion, between the latter and Jerusalem priests.³¹ Trivial though some of these details may seem, they contribute to a fuller case for the heightened profile of Judea in the first century in spite of the consequences of the war. Even if the Flavian period only accentuated or amplified a trend apparent in earlier historical sources, from this time onward interest in Judean religion seems concentrated on activities that involved textual interpretation undertaken by alleged authorities on these renowned oracular writings. Arguably, Josephus supplies in his own person ample evidence for the social ambitions and reception of a recognized expert in Judean religion at the end of the first century, as well as the kinds of claims one might make for the benefit of Roman audiences.

“Judean” Experts in the Middle Part of the Second Century

In the preceding section I argued that the prominence of literary oracles and their specialized interpreters in the events of the Judean War, including the Flavians’ rise to power, formed a pretext for Roman interest in Judean religion and anyone claiming expertise therein. This argument holds important implications for theorizing widespread interest in Judean texts, teachings, and other practices in the last quarter of the first century and to Christian outgrowths thereof in subsequent decades. While he just predates this period, I also sug-

29. For Roman monuments that evoked Judea, see Noreña, “Medium and Message in Vespasian’s *Templum Pacis*”; Millar, “Last Year in Jerusalem: Monuments of the Jewish War in Rome.”

30. Kleiner, *Cleopatra and Rome*; Beck, “The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of their Genesis.”

31. Following Kleiner’s analysis of the captivating effects of Cleopatra’s time at Rome, it even stands to reason that Berenice, Herodian queen and companion of Titus, fanned popular imagination much as Caesar’s consort had over a century earlier.

gested that Paul is best understood as a kind of freelance expert in Judean religion, one whose ethnic credentials, so to speak, were inseparable from the specialty he claimed. Hence, his statements about the law, Israelites, and Judaizing should be viewed not as evidence of Paul negotiating a complex relationship to Judaism or Judean ancestry, but as positions taken among other freelance actors competing for followers within the same niche of expertise. In other words, even when Paul assumes a contrary stance on elements of Judean religion (e.g., circumcision or law observance) as such a concept would have been anticipated by his gentile audiences, I see him as simultaneously locating himself within this subfield of expertise while also differentiating himself from other kinds of Judean experts with whom he was in competition.³²

What advantage is there in positing a more favorable climate for the reception of Judean religion in the aftermath of the Judean War? I would suggest that it holds at least three areas of relevance for thinking about dynamics of differentiation among Judean experts, and experts in wisdom, prophecies, teachings, and other practices involving Christ as a particular cluster within this group. First, I submit that these conditions accrued value to Judean religious offerings predicated on literary prophecies and exegesis, thus contributing to a demand for would-be experts therein. In this vein, one also wonders whether the temple's destruction did not to some extent embolden pretensions to Judean religious expertise insofar as the destabilization of the priesthood likely introduced an element of confusion into expectations, at least among non-Judean audiences, about where, or with whom, its former authority now resided.³³

Second, insofar as all signs point to Paul and his associates fitting this mold of Judean religious expertise (i.e., affirming the oracular character of Judean writings, adducing from them prophecies about Christ and his eschatological significance, and so forth), such developments seem to have contributed to the momentum that would-be authorities on Christ seem to have gathered around the same period.³⁴ The fervent insistence of second-century writers such as Justin that Christ fulfilled all prophecies in the Judean writings might be seen to capitalize deliberately on the intrigue surrounding these texts, as

32. Moreover, nearly all of the other Christ experts mentioned in his letters—Cephas, Peter (who may or may not be one and the same as Cephas), James, and others in Jerusalem, Barnabas, Aquila, Apollos, and at least some of the people to whom he sends greetings in Romans 16—are clearly or seem to be Judeans.

33. For a compatible suggestion regarding pretensions to priestly status in the absence of the temple, see Rüpke, "Starting Sacrifice in the Beyond," 10. Of course, there were certainly non-priestly groups of specialists involved in the temple's administration while it was still in operation, but it stands to reason that the plausibility of claims to possess skills or knowledge traditionally associated with either the priesthood or the Sadducees and Pharisees expanded considerably in its absence.

34. Likewise, Paul's eschatological teachings about Christ and other practices, supported as they were by alleged prophecies from Judean writings, may have benefitted in the Flavian period from general attention drawn to them.

does his strategic characterization of their proto-philosophical character. Echoes of Vespasian's oracle reverberate when he attributes to Moses the prophecy, "A ruler shall not fail from Judah. . . . And he shall be the expectation of the nations, binding his foal to the vine, washing his garment in the blood of the grape."³⁵ Only, now Justin has displaced Josephus as its correct interpreter, and it is Christ to whom it points.

Third, this framework contributes to our understanding of the processes of mutual differentiation and rivalry among second-century Judeans and self-identifying Christians, more specifically, Judean and Christian writer-intellectuals. For, as was the case with Paul and his associates or rivals, this context localizes arguments about Israel, Judean practices, Judeans, and Judean religious texts where they occur in the writings of or stances attributed to "Christian" experts of the second century: Marcion, Justin, Valentinus, Irenaeus, and so on. Whereas such statements are often evaluated for indications of how the figures in question were negotiating a complex relationship to Judaism—either personally, or else as part and parcel of Christianity's relationship to an antecedent tradition—they make more sense as position-takings among rival experts operating within a particular area of wider field of freelance expertise. The same could be said about the use of philosophical discourses and other practices (astrology, numerology, and so forth) that were characteristic of various participants in this sort of activity.

Inasmuch as, again, many freelance religious experts were foreigners who invested considerable energy in the ethnic coding of their wisdom, texts, and practices, situating our second-century Christian evidence within this milieu allows new comparisons to be made between the dilution of other ethnically coded forms of expertise (e.g., Persian, Chaldean, or Egyptian) and the evolution of "Christian" offerings from Judean ones. Here I would like to simply raise the possibility that the tensions with Judeans or Judean-ness that are evident in many of our early Christian sources capture the sort of complex category negotiations whose effects are observable for other ethnic idioms, but whose exact processes and stakes are not attested for lack of the same quality of evidence. In this regard, second-century "Christian" evidence may offer a rare firsthand perspective on such processes, that is, the tendency of the strong ethnic or geographic connotations of certain practices to wane in inverse proportion to the number of specialists offering them, and in different configurations.

To reiterate, I am not suggesting that Judean religion in this context was anything more than a generic and fairly fluid set of ideas held by non-native audiences regarding in what the religion of this region consisted. For the other foreign idioms I mentioned, however, there is evidence of experts enlisting ethnic coding to greater and lesser degrees, as more and less central components

35. Justin, *1 Apol.* 54.2–6 (trans. Minns and Parvis).

of their offerings. It is on account of these tandem dynamics of competition and innovation, I suggest, that the figure of the *magus* loses its Persian connotations toward the end of the first century CE, and around the same time that Chaldean fragments into *astrologus* and *mathematicus*, forms of expertise marked by the same skills and practices but absent ethnic specificity. In other words, as experts enlisted within their programs an increasingly robust set of skills and practices, it became more difficult to categorize them in meaningful ways. The same period might witness a comparable dilution of the ethnic connotations of *Ἰουδαϊσμός/Judaicus* and cognate language, with the result that this language came to encompass any phenomena involving writings, techniques, and practices for which Judeans were once notable, but whose ethnic dimension was either deemphasized or had become obscure. Since parallel developments were occurring for other ethnic categories within this context of religious activity, it is reasonable to surmise that these intra-ethnic negotiations, such as they were, were shaped by predictable dynamics of competition, innovation, and so forth.

At the same time, much had taken place in Judea in the decades that separated Paul from writer-intellectuals such as Marcion and Justin, who took differing positions, or allegedly did so, on Judean texts and practices in the middle decades of the second century. Most important, it appears that oracles in Judean writings had been enlisted once again to legitimate a leader coming forth from Judea, this time Simon bar Kokhba. If the admittedly later and problematic rabbinic sources contain kernels of historicity, two things are striking about his assumption of this role. The first is that authority was conferred upon Simon by a religious specialist, Rabbi Aqiba, who appears to have been participating in the same general form of Judean religious activity (i.e., literary divination from Judean writings put to the task of legitimating a contemporary actor) as the Judean wise men who, according to Josephus, had propelled the events of the Judean War (to say nothing of Josephus himself). The second is that the particular “prophecy,” Num 24:17–19, whence Aqiba is said to have derived Simon’s significance and epithet, also crops up in the *Rule of War*, not unlike Isa 40:3, which appears in both the *Rule of the Community* and the gospels, or the Flavian prophecy, albeit all with different applications.³⁶

What this suggests is that within the broader phenomenon of specialized exegetes using the Judean writings as predictive resources, certain oracles—whether verses clearly marked as such in their original literary contexts or ones imbued with oracular significance—were potent for different experts, and not always in messianic or overtly eschatological frameworks. Just as the Derveni author yoked his religious authority to his superior exegesis of a cosmogonic poem that disclosed the “true” meanings of Orphic initiation rites, and with a view to rival initiators, so too can we observe exegetes of these prophecies

36. See y. *Ta’an.* 4.5–8, 68d; 1QM 6.11; 1QS 8.10–6; Mark 1:3; Matt 3:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23.

asserting *the* explication of cryptic oracles found within them and, likewise, for purposes of competition and differentiation from other experts whose teachings and other practices were girded by the same texts.³⁷

By the middle decades of the second century, and maybe as we would expect given an intensified interest in Judean writings from the final decades of the first, it seems that the contours of Judean religion within this specific context had broadened—or narrowed, depending on how one looks at it—with contestations among would-be experts occurring primarily along the lines of literary exegesis and production. This is not, in my view, the same degree of ethnic coding that one finds in the Pauline epistles, where Paul's Judean ancestry is inseparable from the expertise he claims. Rather, exegesis of Judean writings seems to have become a thing unto itself, irrespective of the interpreter's ethnic credentials. In some cases the texts might be the only ethnicizing element of a specialist's offering.³⁸ It is at this time, I would suggest, that the phenomenon I have theorized converges with a growing body of scholarship on the discursive production of difference through writing, literary interpretation, and other intellectual practices.

In his groundbreaking 2005 study, Daniel Boyarin locates within this window the emergence of Christianity and, then, Judaism as separate and distinct *religions*, or at least the discursive conditions that would soon give rise to these developments. After the time of Justin Martyr, he argues:

[B]ecoming a Christian (or a follower of Christ) meant something different—it no longer entailed becoming a Jew—, and once becoming a Christian became identified with “entering [the true] Israel” the whole semantic/social field shifted. The boundary between Greek and Jew, the definition of Jewishness as national or ethnic identity, was breached or gravely threatened by the self-definition of Gentile Christianity as “Israel”, leading to a reconfiguration of the cultural features that signal the boundary, indeed a reconfiguration of the understanding of the substance of the boundary itself from the genealogical to the religious. Hence, orthodoxy/heresy came to function as a boundary marker, because the boundaries had indeed become blurred.³⁹

Hence we begin to observe the literary assertion of “Christianity” as an exclusive category, with “Judaism,” formed in opposition to such notions of Christianity,

37. This author, a self-styled priest, characterizes the poem as “as a repository of great (and even sacred) hidden truths, which are conveyed in riddles.” See Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 38; cf. Rom 2:5–16. Much of the exegesis pertains to the proper understanding of an initiation rite, and he is clear that literal—really, any other—readings of this poem fail to disclose its true message. Thus, it is precisely through such demonstrations of skill that he claims unparalleled expertise as an Orphic initiator, and always with a view to similarly self-authorized rivals with whose practices his own overlap. So Fitzgerald, “The Derveni Papyrus,” 19–21.

38. Cf. Chilton, “Justin and Israelite Prophecy”; Rajak, “Talking at Trypho.”

39. Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 73, and “Rethinking Jewish Christianity.”

soon to follow. Such contestations were not limited to textual interpretation but might, as Judith Lieu notes, even be brought to bear on the integrity of one's text.⁴⁰ "This further illustrates," she writes, "[how] texts have a social function apart from questions of literacy and of the structures of power."⁴¹ They may articulate the exercise of power by their authors or interpreters.

I find these arguments compelling and would suggest that the context of freelance expertise fleshes out a precise setting of religious activity in which these discursive efforts, as well as intra-Christian constructions of "orthodoxy" and "heresy," were undertaken. Such rivalries were typical neither of ordinary religious practitioners nor of existing religious institutions, but of self-authorized religious experts and fledgling groups of followers contending within a competitive field of overlapping religious offerings. Boyarin's argument gains further plausibility from two dimensions that are absent from his study, but which the context of freelance expertise supplies: The first, to employ his metaphor, is an exact territory whose borders were being drawn through such discursive tactics. The second is a shift in focus from Jewish/Judean and Christian *groups* to individual experts who enjoyed considerable latitude in constructing and situating their own offerings, as well as, at the discursive level, those of whatever opponents they had in view.⁴² I would propose that the context of freelance expertise—more specifically, the subset of Judean religion dominated by writer-intellectuals whose programs were centered on the specialized interpretation of Judean writings—was precisely the territory whose discursive demarcation is ably demonstrated by both of these scholars. This localization has the advantage of allowing us to conceptualize "Christian" and "Jewish" (or Judean) difference non-essentially, as a matter of practices (i.e., discursive, intellectual, religious) taken up within a specific but porous set of specialists couched within a wider field of expertise.⁴³

Moreover, what is often noted but not sufficiently explained is how many other (i.e., non-Judean and non-philosophical) kinds of freelance actors are in the cross-hairs of our second-century authors: magi, astrologers, various diviners, followers of Mithras, and so forth. In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin

40. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 38ff.

41. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 59.

42. I do not share Lieu's view that these dynamics, with respect either to second-century writers or to Paul, reflect a struggle over Jewish identity per se. See Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, 129.

43. Cf. Boyarin, "Rethinking Jewish Christianity," 28: "I suggest, therefore, that there is no nontheological or nonanachronistic way at all to distinguish Christianity from Judaism until institutions are in place that make and enforce this distinction." I do not disagree with Boyarin's point about the institutional codification of difference but think that a focus on arrangements of practice, which include the discourses of difference that he foregrounds in his work, allows us to draw some productive distinctions without resorting to theology or anachronism.

explains how Jesus' birth in a cave in Bethlehem fulfills an aforementioned prophecy in Isaiah, to which he adds: "By these same words those who transmit the mysteries of Mithras were urged by the Devil to declare that they were initiated by Mithras himself in a place they call a cave."⁴⁴ What are we to make of this implied appropriation of Judean oracles by literate specialists who read them in relation to Mithras or, elsewhere in his writings, to Dionysus? Since this line of reasoning is germane to Justin's claim that Moses is older than all other writers, the image of Mithras initiators finding in Isaiah evidence for the cosmogony of their god and the rite to which it lent meaning is suspicious. Yet they may betray actual interactions between Judean, Greek, and Persian corpora for the purpose of contemporary mythmaking.

What is remarkable about our first- and second-century sources is that we can see position-takings within "Judean religion" occurring firsthand in a way that we cannot for other ethnically coded categories of freelance expertise that underwent similar expansions or evolutions. Unlike those other categories, however, negotiations of Judean-ness seem to have been impelled by the extenuating circumstances of the Bar Kokhba Revolt. These circumstances can be theorized in at least two ways. On the one hand, it is entirely possible, if not somewhat likely, that the revolt occasioned a change in the status of Judean religion among Roman audiences. Although more favorable in pre-Hadrianic years than is typically presumed, enthusiasm for Judean religion seems to have declined sharply as the result of an aggressive Roman response to yet another conflict in Judea, to say nothing of Simon's prophetic legitimation by a specialist and the centrality of religious ambitions (viz., the restoration of the temple and its priesthood) in his ideology. On the other, the plight of Jesus' followers in Judea might have prompted even sharper reactions against ethnic or national connotations of "Judean," as well as starker claims to possessing the real interpretive authority over Judean texts.

Hadrian's attitude toward Judea early in his reign has received ample treatment in recent years. Some scholars have argued that the seriousness with which the emperor responded to the revolt is indicative of a more general antipathy toward the province and all associated with it,⁴⁵ while others have characterized the emperor's religious policies as more accommodating, irrespective of the fraught political and military situation that the revolt engendered. Peter Schäfer has even proposed that many inhabitants of Judea may have supported the emperor's policies in the region, with some Judeans helping to suppress the revolt once it erupted.⁴⁶ Regardless of how we construe Hadrian's attitude and

44. Justin, *Dial.* 78.6.

45. Eck, "The Bar Kokhba Revolt," 89.

46. Both Peter Schäfer ("Hadrian's Policy in Judea and the Bar Kokhba Revolt," 281–303) and Giovanni Battista Bazzana ("The Bar Kokhba Revolt and Hadrian's Religious Policy") have likewise argued for a more accommodating view of Hadrian's religious policy leading up to and in the aftermath of the revolt.

motivations, it is easy to envisage how a forceful Roman response to the revolt would have made connotations of Judean-ness less desirable in its aftermath, and, for the severe measures taken against those inhabitants of Judea who refused to acknowledge Simon bar Kokhba as the Christ in lieu of Jesus, all the more so among freelance experts in "Christian" forms of religion.

Justin's apparent knowledge of the punishments inflicted on (Jesus) Christ followers during the revolt is a case in point.⁴⁷ As Boyarin notes, his writings also seem to mark an important turning point for how certain specialists in what, from a Roman perspective, might be considered Judean religion for the inclusion of Judean prophecy began to present their religious offerings in a manner that excluded Judean ethnicity as a meaningful criterion for expertise.⁴⁸ In both the *Apologies* and the *Dialogue*, Justin reorients the terms of the competition to privilege the skillful exegesis of ethnically coded writings. Of his "ethnic reasoning," Denise Kimber Buell concludes, "We should not envision Justin drawing on an established Jewish framework or social formation as a foil for his own process of Christian self-definition. . . . Both 'Jews' and 'Christians' could draw upon the same scriptures, symbols, and surrounding social institutions to craft themselves."⁴⁹ That Justin was not Judean is all the more interesting, for the cataclysmic events of the revolt may have presented him with an opportunity to redefine expertise in Judean religion to his own advantage, more decisively in terms of intellectual skills for which a thoroughgoing mastery of philosophy was more relevant than one's ancestry.

Least too much emphasis fall on Justin's ethnic disentanglements, it is also worth recalling that competition among all kinds of writer-intellectuals was acute under Hadrian, whose emphases on philosophy and antiquity incentivized religious offerings framed in compatible terms. As Marco Rizzi has argued, it was in this climate that Justin and other apologists began to present Christians as a kind of philosophical school, distinct from and superior to not only the so-called Judean philosophies, but also to any other philosophical group or school of thought.⁵⁰ Such dynamics are not absent from earlier texts: Paul, of course, positions himself among other intellectual rivals, including other Judeans, while also demonstrating the superiority of his religious program. But Paul's rivalries are not, on my reading, implicated in the suppression of Judean-ness in the ways that are apparent for Justin and his contemporaries. Whatever Hadrian's attitude toward Judean religion, texts, or *paideia*, I would suggest that Christian authors wishing to distinguish themselves from Judean experts with whose practices and literary foundations theirs overlapped capitalized on the Bar Kokhba revolt as a highly effective tactic for furthering competitive strategies otherwise entirely characteristic of freelance expertise.

47. Justin, *1 Apol.* 31.6.

48. Boyarin, "Justin Martyr Invents Judaism."

49. Buell, *Why This New Race*, 97.

50. Rizzi, "Hadrian and the Christians."

Knowledge of the Bar Kokhba Revolt in the Canonical Gospels?

It is difficult to know the extent to which an actual shift occurred in the status of Judean religion between the Flavian period and the reign of Hadrian, or whether the impression of such a shift relies predominantly on Christian polemic. What can be said with greater certainty is that the revolt supplied a number of plausible expediences or incentives for freelance experts in Judean religion—in the modest sense of experts who enlisted practices or *instrumentum*, including texts, that evoked Judea for certain audiences—to distance themselves from connotations of Judean-ness even as they retained these elements. There were few constraints on the discursive tactics that might further such aims, especially in the nuanced and capacious medium of literary production. Certainly Justin's writings and other second-century apologetic and heresiological literature are notable examples of the dynamics that I postulated earlier, but they may not be the only ones.

An expanding body of scholarship has begun to chip away at traditional premises about the dates, social settings, and contingent social formations that gave rise to the canonical gospels. Among other contributions, two recent volumes have strengthened the case for Pauline influence on the Gospel of Mark,⁵¹ an argument that need not but may affect the dating of the first gospel, while a growing number of scholars has accepted the arguments of Richard Pervo and Steve Mason, among others, for the redating of Luke-Acts to the first quarter of the second century.⁵² Joseph Tyson has attempted to push the timeframe even further to the time of Marcion—which also requires a slightly earlier date for Marcion's arrival in Rome—to support his reading of these texts as consciously engaged in anti-Marcionite polemic.⁵³

More recently, Jason BeDuhn has argued for the influence of Marcion's collective literary activities (i.e., criticism, the elevation of Paul's letters to scriptural status, and the establishment of the first "New Testament") on his contemporaneous Christian rivals, many of whom would be coopted retroactively into orthodox tradition.⁵⁴ Markus Vinzent has expanded the scope of Marcion's influence to include gospel composition as a distinctive genre and general practice.⁵⁵ Vinzent's provocative thesis is of particular interest for present pur-

51. Wischmeyer, Sims, and Elmer, eds., *Paul and Mark*; Becker, Engberg-Pedersen, and Müller, eds., *Mark and Paul*.

52. See Pervo, *Dating Acts*, 15–28; Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament*, 251–96.

53. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts*; cf. Klinghardt, "The Marcionite Gospel and the Synoptic Problem."

54. BeDuhn, *The First New Testament*.

55. See Vinzent, *Marcion and the Dating of the Synoptic Gospels*. For critical engagement with Vinzent's arguments, see BeDuhn, review of *Marcion and the Dating of the Synoptic Gospels*.

poses insofar as he shifts the dating of all examples of this genre, including the canonical gospels, into the middle decades of the second century (ca. 138/145 CE). In a separate yet complementary vein, Stanley Stowers has proposed situating the composition of the gospels first and foremost among networks of self-authorized literate specialists rather than ill-defined religious communities, whose beliefs the texts passively reflected and reinforced.⁵⁶ Likewise, Richard Last has located the gospel authors among contemporary non-Christian groups and networks of writers, comparanda that broaden the kinds of social formations and intellectual settings that might explain the composition and particular features of the former's texts.⁵⁷

Altogether these publications invite reconsideration of a plausible historical context for the composition and content of the canonical gospels, at least in the forms we have received them. Although making the case for a second-century setting would require a far more extensive and cautious treatment of the evidence than space permits, I would like to suggest how the framework I have introduced may open new avenues for research in this vein. In particular, a handful of scholars have identified particular verses or themes in the gospels that suggest awareness of the Bar Kokhba revolt. The most provocative example is the so-called Synoptic Apocalypse (*SynApoc*) of Mark 13, Matthew 24, and Luke 21, with Matthew's highly detailed and specific version offering the strongest support for this reading. In addition to its general warnings about "false prophets" (ψευδοπροφήται) who will come in Jesus' name, saying, "I am the Christ," and who will lead people astray (v. 24), Hermann Detering has noted the seemingly more pointed warning about anyone who might say, "'Look! Here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!'" (v. 23).⁵⁸ This statement is then followed by the dismissal of great signs and wonders that "false prophets" and "false Christs" (ψευδόχριστοι)—or even "lying Christs," a possible allusion to a pun on Bar Kosiba ("son of a star") as Bar Koziba ("son of a liar") that appears in later rabbinic tradition—will perform to persuade people, even some of the elect, of their legitimacy (v. 24).⁵⁹

Not only does Detering view Simon bar Kokhba as the strongest candidate for such explicit messianic pretensions, but he also glimpses in the predictions of torture, death, and hatred by all nations because of Jesus' name or epithet (vv. 9–13) allusions to the fate of those in Judea who were punished for their refusal to disavow Jesus' messianic status for that of Simon.⁶⁰ Additional

56. Stowers, "The Concept of 'Community.'"

57. Last, "The Social Relationship of Gospel Writers," and "Communities that Write."

58. Detering, "The Synoptic Apocalypse."

59. For the "deceitful wonders" attributed to Bar Kokhba, see, e.g., Jerome, *Adv. Rufin.* 3.31; Schäfer, *Der Bar Kokhba Aufstand*, 58, 144; Detering, "Synoptic Apocalypse," 191.

60. Justin, *1 Apol.* 1.31.36; cf. Eusebius, *E.H.* 4.8.41; *Chron.* 2.168ff. For the salience of Daniel in Josephus' account of the war, see Mason, "Josephus, Daniel, and the Flavian House."

evidence offered for Bar Kokhba's relevance to the gospels includes indications that Daniel, a text whose significance to the Synoptic authors needs no defense, was being read with particular fervor in the context of the revolt—possibly for Hadrian's alleged imitation of, or, at least, perceived parallels to, Antiochus IV Epiphanes⁶¹—as well as the unsuitability of other events proposed for the *SynApoc*, the “Caligula Crisis” or the Judean War.⁶²

It is worth restating a point that Detering makes at the beginning of his argument: “While elsewhere New Testament scholars bring to bear on particular exegetical questions an extravagant richness and admirable knowledge of historical details, they become remarkably curt with regard to the dating of the Synoptic Gospels.”⁶³ Maintaining that 70 CE is the only reliable *terminus a quo* for these texts, Detering draws attention to how the scholarly tendency has been to elide the gospel authors' apparent knowledge of the temple's destruction with their actual historical situation. And yet, the leap from *terminus a quo* to “around when” need not be axiomatic, all the more so since, in his view, further evidence cannot be put forward to justify dating the gospels to the immediate aftermath of this event, or even to subsequent decades of the same century. In sum, for Detering, nothing about a first century *terminus a quo* precludes a later setting for the composition of these texts. “[It] is altogether possible and permissible,” he writes, “to drop apriori chronological stipulations so as to direct one's view out beyond the boundary of the first century and investigate whether or not in some later time an historical situation might possibly be found that would produce a more adequate understanding of the text.”⁶⁴

To these points I would add that where non-canonical texts are concerned—with respect both to general matters of dating and literary relationship, and also to awareness of Bar Kokhba more specifically—scholars are more amendable to second-century dates. The *Apocalypse of Peter*, whose warnings about a “false Christ” who will persecute Christians and make them martyrs in a discussion about the *parousia* of the “true” Christ and in the parable of the fig-tree (chs. 1–2), are read more comfortably as a reflection on the Bar Kokhba revolt, and therefore as evidence for the text's mid-second century date.⁶⁵ In support of this reading, Richard Bauckham notes that the false messiah is someone who does not demand worship, but who merely claims the epithet; those who are deceived by and eventually reject him, as well as Jesus, are all Judeans.⁶⁶ The text

61. See Detering, “Synoptic Apocalypse,” 187–88.

62. For discussion of the unviability of these alternatives, see Detering, “Synoptic Apocalypse,” 177–85.

63. Detering, “Synoptic Apocalypse,” 161.

64. Detering, “Synoptic Apocalypse,” 164.

65. See Hennecke and Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha II*, 622; Detering, “Synoptic Apocalypse,” 175–76, and nn. 24–25; Bauckham, “The *Apocalypse of Peter*.” A notable exception to this interpretation is Peter Schäfer, whose objections Detering finds weak. See Schäfer, *Der Bar Kochba Aufstand*, 61–62.

66. Bauckham, “Jews and Jewish Christians in Israel,” 230.

may also furnish additional insight into a major point of contention between the “Christ followers” of Jesus and Simon, respectively, that is, Bar Kokhba’s plan to rebuild the Jerusalem temple and restore its regular religious activities.⁶⁷ Bauckham sees this dynamic undergirding the transfiguration scene, in which Jesus sharply rebukes Peter and accuses him of veiled understanding for having offered to build three earthly dwelling-places, and then reveals a vision of a heavenly temple that God has created for his true messiah.⁶⁸ Insofar as the temple’s destruction may have energized or emboldened freelance experts in Judean religion, one can imagine how, messianic rivalries aside, Bar Kokhba’s intention to reinvest Judean religious authority in the temple and its priesthood under the cryptic “Eleazar the Priest” would have provoked ambivalence among “Christian” experts.

Conclusions

There is insufficient space in this article to engage more than a few examples of the technical scholarship on matters of dating and source and textual criticism for canonical and non-canonical gospel literature. Nevertheless, the above propositions offer a preliminary starting point for thinking about the implications of the Bar Kokhba revolt as a plausible social setting for the composition of Matthew, and maybe also Mark and Luke, depending on one’s sensibilities about the relative priority of these texts and about whether Mark 13 reflects in its lesser degree of detail an awareness of exact historical circumstances or a general apocalyptic sensibility. And while the Gospel of John lacks material equivalent to the *SynApoc*, other features of the text (e.g., its negative depiction of Judea/Judeans and embrace of the Galilee, a region untouched by Bar Kokhba’s sovereign Israel) may be in keeping with non-literary dynamics considered above.⁶⁹ Even if one is willing to entertain the possibility that allusions to Bar Kokhba in the *SynApoc* enter the gospels as later redactions, the plausibility of such a reading may not depend so narrowly on these verses. One wonders whether the gospels’ complex negotiations of Jesus’ relationship to Judean religion and to other Judean religious experts, institutional and non-institutional, as well as their portrayals of Judeans as persecutors, would have even made sense before Bar Kokhba.⁷⁰

In the middle decades of the second century, however, conscious efforts to decouple Judean writings, the figure of Jesus, and his religious legacy from Judea and Judean ethnicity have a compelling pretext. Accusations of Judean

67. For the religious dimensions of Bar Kokhba’s political ideology, see Schäfer, “Hadrian’s Policy in Judaea,” 290–91.

68. See Bauckham, “Jews and Jewish Christians in Israel,” 232–33.

69. For the geographic dimensions of the text, including its depictions of Ἰουδαῖοι, see Meeks, “Galilee and Judea in the Fourth Gospel”; Lowe, “Who Were the ΙΟΥΔΑΙΟΙ?”

70. So I argue in Wendt, “Forty Lashes Minus One.”

persecution of Christians ring clearly in the writings of Justin,⁷¹ who projects them meticulously, with “proof” from Isaiah, back onto the crucifixion of Jesus.⁷² Here I can only broach the possibility that similar dynamics might be at work in the gospels because they, like so much non-canonical literature that we place more comfortably in the second century, are only taking shape in this period. Regardless of whether one is willing to entertain this bold suggestion, I hope that I have demonstrated the advantages of localizing discursive negotiations of Judean religion, in my sense, within a particular class of religious activity that includes both Judean experts and actors who were not Judeans per se, but whose religious programs were rooted nevertheless in the figure of Christ and prophecies in Judean writings.

71. E.g., Justin, *Dial.* 16.4.

72. So too Lieu, “Accusations of Jewish Persecution in Early Christian Sources,” 84: “Jewish involvement in Christian suffering is an important element in de-legitimizing not only any Jewish appeal to scriptural fulfillment but also Jewish suffering itself.”

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