

Sacrificing Josephus to Save Philo: Cesare Baronio and the Jewish Origins of Christian Monasticism

Jan Machielsen¹

Published online: 7 July 2016

© The Author(s) 2016. This article is published with open access at Springerlink.com

Edward Gibbon can hardly be accused of displaying credulity in his famous chapter on the rise of Christianity in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Under a façade of mock reverence, he cast doubt on the many miracles of the early Church. Yet for all his scepticism, Gibbon still took as ‘probable’ the conversion to Christianity of the *therapeutae*, a Jewish sect, who ‘changed their name, preserved their manners, adopted some new articles of faith, and gradually became the fathers of the Egyptian ascetics.’¹ According to the Jewish philosopher Philo (our only source), the *therapeutae*, though primarily based around Lake Mareotis near Alexandria, could be found ‘in many places in the inhabited world.’² The Christian appropriation of this first-century group began with the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea in the early fourth century and continued into the Reformation period and beyond.³ In the process, they were appropriated not only as early Christians but transformed into monastics as well.

¹ E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I, New York, 1993, p. 522.

² Philo, *De vita contemplativa*, pp. 21–2.

³ S. Inowlocki, ‘Eusebius of Caesarea’s Interpretatio Christiana of Philo’s De vita contemplativa’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 97, 2004, pp. 305–28; A. Grafton, ‘Church History in Early Modern Europe: Tradition and Innovation’, in *Sacred History: Uses of the Christian Past in the Renaissance World*, ed. K. van Liere et al., Oxford, 2012, pp. 3–26 (21–5).

A first version of this note was delivered at the Reception of Josephus seminar in the spring of 2014. The author would like to thank all those present for their questions and suggestions, as well as Anthony Grafton and the convenors, Joanna Weinberg and Martin Goodman, for their invaluable comments on later versions of this text.

✉ Jan Machielsen
MachielsenJ@cardiff.ac.uk

¹ Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

To complicate matters, however, the *therapeutae* were also merged with another Jewish sect, the Essenes, who, in a potted etymology by Epiphanius of Salamis, were turned into Jessaeans (for Jesse or Jesus).⁴ Philo's composition of a separate account on the Essenes may have facilitated this merger. At least, Jerome drew on both 'the imitator of Platonic conversation' Philo and 'the Greek Livy' Josephus in his account of the origins of monasticism, stripping both men off their Jewish identities in the process.⁵ By the early sixteenth century, at least one Latin edition of the *De vita contemplativa*, Philo's unique text on the *therapeutae*, was retitled 'On the Essenes.'⁶ While such Christian fantasies have long since been discarded, debate about the identity of these sects continues. Striking parallels and differences – notably the presence of women among the *therapeutae* – have been collated and discussed.⁷ Yet, if Christians had once brought the two Jewish groups together, the European Reformations would drive them apart.⁸ Study of how the Essenes and *therapeutae* became separated in the late sixteenth century by the Catholic historian Cesare Baronio (1538–1607) may add further historical background to these present-day debates and shed light on Baronio's working methods and source criticism.⁹

Almost from the outset of the Reformation, the Essenes and *therapeutae* formed a key part of the defence of Catholic tradition, ostensibly clear evidence that monasticism had originated, not in the Middle Ages, but in the time of Christ. In 1530, the Leuven theologian Jacobus Latomus advanced Philo's *therapeutae* in defence of monastic vows. For Latomus, the philosopher's credibility was bolstered by his inclusion among Jerome's *De viris illustribus*.¹⁰ This was but one attempt to infuse the Fathers with the still greater antiquity of Josephus and Philo, contemporaries of the apostles. Yet, the Fathers were also emulsifiers holding the not too stable suspension of Essenes and *therapeutae* together. In his *Origines*

⁴ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 29.1.2; 29.4.9 (transl. F. Williams, Leiden, 2009, pp. 123, 126). On this etymology, see A. Pourkier, *L'Hérésiologie chez Epiphane de Salamine*, Paris, 1992, pp. 439–40.

⁵ Jerome, *Epistolae*, XXII.35 (*Patrologia Latina*, XXII, col. 421): 'Philo Platonici sermonis imitator... Josephus Graecus Livius... Essenos refert.' Jerome's treatment of Philo in *De viris illustribus liber*, VIII, XI (*Patrologia Latina*, XXIII, cols 621, 625) played up his Jewish identity.

⁶ Philo, *Libri Antiquitatum; Quaestionum et solutionum in Genesin; De essaeis; De nominibus Hebraicis; De mundo*, ed. J. Sichardt, Basel, 1527.

⁷ E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, ed. G. Vermès et al., 2 vols, Edinburgh, 1979, II, pp. 591–7; P. Bilde, 'The Essenes in Philo and Josephus', in *Qumran between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. F. H. Cryer and T. L. Thompson, Sheffield, 1998, pp. 32–68; G. Vermès and M. Goodman, *The Essenes according to the Classical Sources*, Sheffield, 1989, pp. 15–17; J. E. Taylor and P. R. Davies, 'The So-called Therapeutae of "De vita contemplativa": Identity and Character', *Harvard Theological Review*, 91/1, 1998, pp. 3–24; J. E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-century Alexandria: Philo's 'Therapeutae' Reconsidered*, Oxford, 2006, ch. 3.

⁸ For some of the later polemics which Baronio's treatment set in motion, see A. Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, 2 vols, Oxford, 1983–93, II, pp. 395, 699–700; A. Grafton and J. Weinberg, "I have always loved the Holy Tongue": Isaac Casaubon, the Jews, and a Forgotten Chapter in Renaissance Scholarship, Cambridge, MA, 2011, pp. 164–230; J. Machielsens, *Martin Delrio: Demonology and Scholarship in the Counter-Reformation*, Oxford, 2015, pp. 328–35.

⁹ For an excellent introduction, see G. A. Guazzelli, 'Cesare Baronio and the Roman Catholic Vision of the Early Church', in *Sacred History* (n. 3 above), pp. 53–71.

¹⁰ J. Latomus, *Libellus de fide et operibus, et de votis atque institutis monasticis*, Antwerp, 1530, sigs E7^v–E8^v. On Jerome's text, see n. 5 above.

monasticae (1563), the Dillingen, later Douai theologian Matthaeus Galenus, for instance, devoted separate chapters to the testimony of Philo, Eusebius, Epiphanius, and Josephus in precisely that order – it required the authority of the Fathers to keep Philo's *therapeutae* and Josephus's Essenes (as Jessaeans) on the proverbial same page.¹¹ Josephus's testimony that the Essenes were not a new sect proved particularly troublesome.¹² In 1586, Robert Bellarmine already acknowledged the existence of two rival opinions, which he both judged probable: 'Some claim that Josephus and Philo do not speak about the same people... Others teach that both Philo and Josephus speak about Christians, which St Jerome appears to favour.'¹³

When in 1588 Cesare Baronio confronted the roots of monasticism in the first volume of his *Annales ecclesiastici*, it was this apparent disagreement between Philo and Josephus that he set out to confront. Remarkably, Baronio parted the two groups of ascetics without once employing the word *therapeutae*. The manuscript version even referred to Philo's *De vita contemplativa* as *De Essenis*.¹⁴ Baronio offered, as was his custom, a universal consensus of ecclesiastical historians including Jerome, Eusebius, Epiphanius, Bede, and 'other more recent ones, with the exception of the renovators [*novantes*], because they pursue the monastic institution with hatred.'¹⁵ These Protestants forced Baronio to return to the original Jewish sources, for they claimed that 'Philo did not speak about Christians, but that he composed a history on the Jewish sect of the so-called Essenes. Josephus [in the *Antiquities*] demonstrates that they existed before the time of Christ, since he reports that Herod bestowed some favour on them.'¹⁶ The Essenes by virtue of having existed before Christ could not have been Christians.

Baronio's response, not for the last time, proceeded from an argument of silence. The Essenes could not have existed before Christ, or the Scriptures would have mentioned them:

It is clearly a matter worthy of wonder: how could it be that when mention is made in the Gospel of all other Jewish sects, indeed of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Galileans, and the Herodians; that truly, all memory of the Essenes, whose way of life could appear to be worthy of admiration before all others, would remain completely covered up in silence?¹⁷

¹¹ M. Galenus, *Origines monasticae, seu, De prima ac vera Christianae monasticae origine commentarius*, Dillingen, 1563, fols 18^v–64^r (chaps 2–5); the same strategy is also used in R. Hall, *De proprietate et vestuario monachorum... liber unus*, Douai, 1585, fols 12^v–13^r.

¹² For Herod's support of the Essenes, see Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 15.371–9. For earlier references, see idem, *The Jewish War*, 1.78–80; idem, *Antiq.*, 13.171–2.

¹³ R. Bellarmine, *Disputationum de controversiis Christianae fidei tomus primus*, Ingolstadt, 1588 [first ed. 1586], col. 437: 'Quidam... asserunt non loqui de eisdem Iosephum et Philonem... Alii docent tam Philonem, quam Iosephum de Christianis loqui, quibus favere videtur Beatus Hieronymus.'

¹⁴ MS, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana [BAV], Vat. lat. 5684, fol. 383; cf. Cesare Baronio, *Annales ecclesiastici: Tomus primus*, Rome, 1588, p. 597.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 598: 'et alii recentiores, Novantibus exceptis, eo quod Monachorum instituta odio prosequantur.'

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 'non de Christianis locutum esse Philonem, sed de ea Iudaeorum secta historiam contexuisse, quae Essenorum dicta esset, quam Iosephus ante Christi tempus exitisse demonstrat, cum de Herode agit his nonnihil favente.' On Herod's favour, see n. 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 599: 'Admiratione plane digna res est: quidnam sit, quod cum in Evangelio de ceteris omnibus Iudaeorum sectis habetur mentio, nempe de Pharisaeis, Sadduceis, Galilaeis, et Herodianis; de Essenis

Josephus's non-testimony elsewhere was entered into evidence in much the same way:

Josephus the Jew assails and refutes in those two most eloquent books with all his might the calumnies against the Jews collected by Apion [i.e. in *Against Apion*]. At the same time he very boastfully publicizes anything of nobility or worth on his people from all the ancient authors he had been able to hunt down, even from the most hidden of places. And yet he remained silent on that most celebrated way of life of all, that of the Essenes, when their so famous school would have been accessible from Alexandria, where Apion was accustomed to live?¹⁸

Similarly, the pagan authors who lived before Christ had praised pious men from all over the world, even the Brahmins of India: 'truly, on the Essenes who easily surpass all the foresaid, and who were placed plainly right before the eyes of everyone in the centre of the earth, you will not find even a word.'¹⁹

Half of Baronio's strategy, then, was to exploit the silences in these accounts. What Josephus, and to a lesser extent Philo, said was not nearly as important as what they did not say. Of course, their actual testimony remained problematic at times, and the second part of Baronio's strategy was to concede, at least for the moment, part of the territory which had first been gained. Josephus's revelation that the Essenes existed before Christ was one such problem. Baronio relented, without (as we shall see) quite conceding: 'Truly, we do not fight hard to deny that there existed Essenes before Christ.'²⁰ They may have existed previously under Herod: 'For the writings of Josephus', he insisted in a late manuscript addition, 'have no memory of them before then.'²¹ This apparent concession also led Baronio to revert to his original strategy of using silences. Their way of life would make the Essenes the most likely of all the sects to convert:

Clearly the Gospels prove that Christ the Lord at some time or other rejected all the sects who existed in Palestine, indeed the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, and the Samaritans. We truly have never read that the Essenes ever made the least amount of trouble either for the Lord or His apostles and disciples.²²

Footnote 17 continued

vero, quorum vitae institutio videri poterat prae ceteris admiratione digna, omnis memoria silentio prorsus obvoluta remanserit?

¹⁸ Ibid.: 'Iosephus Iudaeus duobus illis disertissimis libris, quibus calumnias in Iudaeos ab Apione congestas, totis viribus nisus impugnat atque refellit; simulque quidquid nobile dignumve de gente sua ex quibuscumque antiquis scriptoribus venari potuisset, ex abditissimis etiam locis gloriose admodum in medium profert; tamen de Essenorum instituto omnium celeberrimo tacuit, cum eorum gymnasium tam celebre apertum esset Alexandriae, ubi Apio degere consuevit'

¹⁹ Ibid.: 'de Essenis vero, qui praedictos omnes facile antecellerent, quique plane ob oculos omnium essent in medio terrae constituti, nec verbum quidem habuisse reperies.'

²⁰ Ibid.: 'Verum nec in his contentiosum funem trahimus ut negemus ante Christum fuisse Essenos.'

²¹ Ibid.; MS BAV, Vat. lat. 5684, fol. 384: 'nulla enim antiquior apud Iosephum de eis habetur memoria.' See the references at n. 12 above.

²² Baronio, *Annales* (n. 14 above), pp. 599–600: 'Sane quidem omnes sectas, quae erant in Palaestina, Christum Dominum aliquando aversatas esse, nempe Pharisaeos, Sadducaeos, Herodianos, et Samaritas, Evangelica attestatione exploratum habetur. De Essenis vero, quod aliquando vel Domino, vel eius Apostolis atque discipulis vel minimum negotii fecerint, nusquam legitur.'

Baronio's argument thus alternated between two strands – a cycle in which ground is first gained and then partially conceded. In this process of land reclamation, Baronio appears to sacrifice Josephus's Essenes to protect Philo's 'Essenes', that is, the *therapeutae* who Philo discussed in the *De vita contemplativa*: 'for the more ancient Essenes, who are described by Josephus, somewhat differ from those depicted by Philo so that it appears that while the latter came forth out of the former, they are nevertheless not identical to them.'²³ Philo's Essenes had converted to Christianity but preserved those parts of their way of life which their new faith did not contradict. The fact that Josephus's Essenes were firmly rooted in the Holy Land, while Philo's were not, helped develop this contrast further:

Hence you must consider that the Essenes, whom Josephus remembers, live in Judea... and were in many things slacker than those who live in Egypt whose history Philo composes. For Josephus testifies about his Essenes that they used to live in towns, while those whom Philo wrote about usually lived outside in gardens and on farms.²⁴

In addition, Baronio attached particular importance to Josephus's testimony that the Essenes in Judea numbered only four thousand – an observation backed up by the *Quod omnis probus liber sit*, Philo's work on the Essenes.²⁵ Turning to the *De vita contemplativa*, Baronio developed this numerical difference and returned to his habitual argument from silence:

But the same Philo in the book which he composed on the contemplative life [*De vita contemplativa*] says that this sort of men are great in number near Alexandria; indeed, that they live in the other regions of Egypt, and in addition in many parts of the world. He even adds that the same sort of life was adopted by Greeks and barbarians. [He thus] shows sufficiently plainly that he spoke only of Christians who, all over the world and [coming] from all nations, would have cultivated in these earliest times of the Church [this] way of life in nearly the same way. For who has ever read that Greeks or Barbarians had become Essenes, or that Jewish Essenes are to be found in the other provinces of the world?²⁶

In addition, Baronio, when confronted with inconvenient details in Philo's account, was also prepared (as Jerome had been) to countenance the 'Judaising'

²³ Ibid.: 'nam antiquiores Esseni, qui a Iosepho describuntur, ab his qui a Philone sunt positi, nonnihil differunt, ut appareat hos ex illis provenientes, non tamen eosdem esse cum illis.'

²⁴ Ibid.: 'Hinc videas Essenos, quorum meminit Iosephus, in Iudaea agentes... in multis remissiores illis fuisse, qui agerent in Aegypto, quorum Philo texit historiam. Nam de suis Essenis testatur Iosephus, agere solitos in civitatibus: qui vero a Philone scribuntur, foris in hortis ac villis vivere soliti erant.' MS BAV, Vat. lat. 5684, fol. 384 shows that Baronio reworked and strengthened this argument.

²⁵ Josephus, *Antiq.*, 18.20; Philo, *Quod omnis probus liber sit*, 75.

²⁶ Baronio, *Annales* (n. 14 above), p. 600: 'At cum idem Philo in libro, quem de vita contemplativa conscripsit, dicat eiusmodi genus hominum apud Alexandriam magno esse numero, immo et in aliis Aegypti regionibus agere: quin insuper et in multis orbis partibus; ac etiam addat, idem vitae genus a Graecis et Barbaris esse receptum: satis manifeste declarat, non nisi de Christianis esse locutum, qui ubique terrarum, et ex omnibus gentibus eiusdem vitae, his primis Ecclesiae temporibus, in eundem ferme modum institutum excolerent. Quis enim umquam legit Graecos vel Barbaros factos Essenos, vel Iudaeos Essenos in aliis orbis provinciis reperiri?' Cf. Philo, *De vita contemplativa*, 21–2.

practices of these supposed early Christians.²⁷ Baronio suggested that the intense hatred of the native Egyptians for the Jews would have aided their conversion by Mark, the apostle of the Alexandrian church.²⁸

A fundamental question remains. Rather than conceding ground, why did Baronio not stake out and defend his final, more limited conclusion from the outset? What were the purpose and value of this argumentative strategy? His manuscript shows that he made no attempt to revise his overall argument, yet his most notable addition comes at the beginning. It takes the form of an extended etymological excursus, justifying why Christians might have been called ‘Essenes.’ Baronio noted Epiphanius’s speculations about the Jessaeans, yet he also drew on Philo who

declares clearly that Essenes signify saints [*sanctos*] and have received this name from [their] holiness. When we discussed the Christian name above we sufficiently stated that in the beginning of the nascent Church all Christians were indeed called saints [*sanctos*].²⁹

This addition shows that Baronio perceived well that the debate was also one about nomenclature and labels. The Magdeburg Centurators had solved the traditional Christian equation of *therapeutae*, Christians, and Essenes by cutting out the middleman. They argued that the *therapeutae* were not Christians, but (Jewish) Essenes, as Baronio’s opponent Joseph Scaliger would as well.³⁰ Perhaps, the absence of the *therapeutae* label in the *Annales* served to complicate this rebranding exercise.

At the same time, it is clear that the original expansive view which dressed up both Essenes and *therapeutae* as Christian monks still retained sufficient value for Baronio. Perhaps, this was partly because Josephus’s Essenes were (for different reasons) as plausible an ancestor for monasticism as the *therapeutae*.³¹ Yet, we should also note that the strategy allowed Baronio to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, offering up as many different – not necessarily compatible – arguments that he could muster for the ancient roots of Christian monasticism, as Bellarmine had also done. Baronio’s argument was an attempt at consensus, at least where the fundamental issue at stake – the apostolic origins of monasticism – was concerned. If the expansive account proved too much, the reader might still accept that some of these idealized ascetics were or, indeed, became Christians. Although, as we saw for Gibbon, the Jewish sects continued to enjoy a rich Christian afterlife, not even

²⁷ Jerome, *De viris illustribus liber*, VIII (*Patrologia Latina*, XXIII, col. 621): ‘Alexandriae primam Ecclesiam adhuc iudaizantem.’

²⁸ Baronio, *Annales* (n. 14 above), pp. 600–601.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 593; MS BAV, Vat. lat. 5684, fol. 383: ‘Esseos sanctos significare atque a sanctitate illud eos nomen accepisse, non obscure declarat. Verum omnes Christianos ipso exordio nascentis Ecclesiae Sanctos esse nominatos, satis superius dictum, cum egimus de nomine Christiano.’ Cf. Philo, *Quod omnis probus liber sit*, 75. For Baronio’s discussion ‘de nomine Christiano’, see Baronio, *Annales*, pp. 298–9.

³⁰ Machielsen, *Delrio* (n. 8 above), pp. 335–40.

³¹ Joseph Scaliger would later argue that Josephus’s ‘active’ Essenes shared more similarities with monasticism than Philo’s ‘passive’ Essenes, the *therapeutae*: Joseph Scaliger, *Elenchus trihaeresii Nicolai Serarii*, Franeker 1605, p. 246.

Catholics necessarily retained them. Half a century after Baronio, another Vatican Librarian, Lukas Holste (1596–1661), rejected all talk of the Essenes – ‘although St Jerome considers them to have been Christians’ – and blamed the absence of evidence for early monasticism on the fires of the Diocletian persecution.³² Yet, in dividing the Essenes and *therapeutae* Baronio had made a lasting impact. Not even Scaliger was quite able to put them together again.³³ Such a fix would have required the patristic glue that once united them as Christians.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

³² Lukas Holste, ‘Materia dissertationis proemialis ad regulas monasticas, e schedis posthumis Lucae Holstenii’, in *Patrologia Latina*, CIII, col. 403: ‘quanquam hos sanctus Hieronymus fuisse Christianos fuisse.’

³³ For Scaliger’s approach to the Essenes and reappraisal of Philo as a Hellenistic Jew, see Grafton (n. 8 above), II, pp. 299–300, 507–10; and specifically on the *therapeutae*, see also Machielsen, *Delrio* (n. 8 above), pp. 335–40.