Historians tend to turn data into stories. For those of us who study the ancient data typically categorized as early Judaism and early Christianity, few stories captivate as much as Jewish particularism and the tale of the “turncoat” general Josephus. The story of Jewish particularism during the first century often assumes an inevitable culture clash. The Jews are different; Rome quashes difference. Josephus somehow negotiated that difference and jumped on board the victor’s train. The Jewish understanding of figurative images stands out as a key piece in this story. Rome loves images and statues; in the first century, Jews could not tolerate images—though, their aversion abates somewhat after 70 CE. Josephus plays into this narrative through his writings.

In an admirable first book, Jason von Ehrenkrook seeks to complicate this story by taking a closer look at the data. Von Ehrenkrook participates in a stream of scholarship, influenced by cultural studies and other theoretical developments, that leans toward complexity and shuns overly simple explanations. Taking the reader through a collection of careful analytical insights, von Ehrenkrook thus tells a different story. In his narrative, Josephus was not a “turncoat” but a skilled author, wielding complex rhetorical strategies in order to bridge Roman and Jewish identities. The Jews were not as particular as they might seem, and their putative intolerance of all images is not a foregone conclusion. Von Ehrenkrook here produces a trove of insight and, in many ways, a model for moving
forward in our field. While some facets of the book could use further clarity (see below), the book makes an important and innovative contribution to our endeavors to understand Josephus.

In many ways, von Ehrenkrook’s argument operates in irony or paradox.¹ What appears to be cultural conflict is actually evidence of confluence (4). What seems like anti-Roman sentiment, in fact, embodies Roman ideals (171). Resistance to Roman sculpture “should not be viewed simply as a struggle against religio-cultural alterity, but as an expression of the wider Mediterranean milieu” (20; emphasis original). Von Ehrenkrook begins by situating his paradoxical reading of Josephus in the history of scholarship. He divides those who do not acknowledge the ironies of Josephus (Stephen Fine) from those whose sophisticated work von Ehrenkrook carries forward (Joseph Gutmann and John Barclay). Von Ehrenkrook uses this discussion to highlight the role of cultural identification in Josephus’s writings. He argues that Josephus (and other Jews in the Second Temple period) cannot be contained by simplistic binaries between “Jewish” and “Roman.” “Both worlds were inextricably linked in the mind of Josephus” (15), a concept that von Ehrenkrook will later describe as Josephus’s “Romano-Jewish” identity (135).

Von Ehrenkrook then lays the groundwork for his ironic reading at a broad level, discussing Jewish responses to statues and figurative art throughout the Roman Mediterranean world. For him, a relatively “statueless Jerusalem” in the first century should be assessed with “a regional approach to the data” (39). Such an approach nuances our understanding of early Jews, who we should see as complex as “any other ethnos living in the Roman Mediterranean basin” (37). Indeed, Judean attitudes toward statues may be informed not only by interpretations of the second commandment but also by their regional neighbors, such as the Nabateans, who also avoid figurative sculpture and particularly in cultic contexts. Furthermore, von Ehrenkrook argues, Jewish writings fully participate in wider discourses regarding images in the Mediterranean world.

In his third chapter von Ehrenkrook addresses the second commandment directly, in Josephus and then, for comparative purposes, in “Greco-Roman Jewish literature.”² Here he counters the presumption that Jews uniformly interpreted the commandment by rejecting all figurative art before 70 CE (64). In order to problematize this view, the chapter first examines the second commandment in its own literary context. Von Ehrenkrook’s analysis reveals several areas of ambiguity in Exod 20:2–6 as preserved in the MT, which form the basis for interpretative diversity in early Judaism. He then

¹. Von Ehrenkrook uses the term “irony” sparingly (see especially 4), but the concept operates throughout the book. He briefly addresses the more recent trend of treating irony in ancient writings (particularly those identified as Jewish or Christian) as subversion to empire (see 180 n. 32).

². Von Ehrenkrook’s terminology here is notable. See below.
examines Josephus’s treatment of the commandment in both exegetical and narrative contexts. Von Ehrenkrook argues that Josephus’s apparent blanket prohibition of images actually only forbids divine images used in cultic settings. Von Ehrenkrook explores the occurrences of this prohibition in Josephus’s narratives and exegetical passages to demonstrate the complexity and diversity of Jewish attitudes toward imagery.

Von Ehrenkrook then shifts his focus in two chapters dedicated to the distinct rhetorical strategies of Josephus’s major works, Bellum Judaicum (B.J.; ch. 4) and Antiquitates Judaicae (A.J.; ch. 5). Von Ehrenkrook attributes discrepancies between the two works not to a shift in loyalties, as do some scholars, but rather to different agendas in each work. Thus in B.J. Josephus discusses Jewish understandings of imagery through the lens of sacred space. Jerusalem is depicted as a “sculptureless haven,” and the absence of sculpture denotes sacred space. A.J., on the other hand, idealizes aniconism as a cultural value shared by both Romans and Jews in their visions of a pristine past. Jews have simply held onto this ancient ideal, while the Romans have lost sight of it. Icons in Judea, then, pose a threat to “civic tranquility,” as more radical elements seek to uphold the ideal.

For example, von Ehrenkrook notes the differences between accounts of the Royal Stoa on the southern end of the Herodian temple complex in A.J. and B.J., in which the former offers some description of their ornamentation while the latter explicitly denies their adornment. He identifies A.J. as likely more reliable, but von Ehrenkrook argues that “Josephus is not confused in this instance” (107). Rather, the differences between these accounts display Josephus’s rhetorical agenda in B.J., emphasizing that “Judea, Jerusalem, and especially the temple complex represent a place—a sacred territory—without sculpture of any type” (107). This plays into another emphasis in von Ehrenkrook’s fourth chapter, namely, how Josephus diverges from “wider Mediterranean discourse on statues and space,” in which the presence of statues marks sacredness (125).

Although Josephus contrasts with Greco-Roman discourses on sculptures and imagery—and thus particularizes the Jews—he also participates in a shared distaste for “Greekness” among Roman elites. This “Greekness” is manifested in physical sculptures and other imagery. Von Ehrenkrook argues that such “Greekness becomes a kind of measuring stick for imperial illegitimacy” in Roman political discourse (130). Thus, as mentioned earlier, Josephus forges a “Romano-Jewish” identity. This may be the weakest paradox of the entire book, as von Ehrenkrook moves from Jewish aversion to Greco-Roman views on sculptures toward a Romano-Jewish aversion to Greekness. The former argument undercuts the latter, and thus by default one emerges from this chapter with a stronger sense of Jewish particularism in the rhetoric of Josephus—albeit with a recognition that such rhetoric does not match reality.
Von Ehrenkrook’s chapter on A.J. features fewer rhetorical gymnastics as it situates Josephus within Roman historiographical practices. Josephus uses his narratives of the past in a manner akin to Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus. For all of these authors, historical figures and events represent the cultural ideals of virtue and piety in the present. Thus Josephus suppresses any hint of iconographic representations in the biblical narratives (e.g., the creation narrative, the golden calf, and the bronze serpent on Moses’s staff). Also, Moses plays a role similar to what we see in Plutarch’s description of Numa Pompilius as an idealized lawgiver.

Just as chapter 1 served as an introduction, the sixth chapter—the book’s shortest by far—serves as a conclusion, tying together the various strands in von Ehrenkrook’s argument. Here he notes the difficulties facing the Jews following the destruction of Jerusalem and offers Josephus’s works as one man’s attempt at navigating this social predicament. Josephus maneuvers the “ever widening gulf between Roman and Jew” by showing how “Jewish particularity” (aniconism), in fact, embodies Romanitas (177). However, von Ehrenkrook’s Josephus is no mere lackey or quisling “groveling for attention and acceptance at the feet of his Flavian superiors” (179). Rather, von Ehrenkrook frames Josephus in postcolonial terms as practicing “resistant adaptation” (borrowed from John Barclay and compared to Homi Bhabha’s mimicry). Such an approach views Josephus as employing dominant culture for his own (colonized) ends. This intriguing possibility, however, only receives two paragraphs of consideration before the book concludes.

Though they should not detract from the book’s important contributions, a few areas could use further consistency and clarity. First, the structure and flow of the work feels disjointed at times and repetitive at others. Von Ehrenkrook’s methodological eclecticism leaves the reader occasionally wondering how one island of analysis relates to another. For example, in the third chapter von Ehrenkrook shifts from cultural criticism and archaeological insights into more traditional exegetical-heavy language (“this interpretation overlooks the grammatical function of the infinitive” [72]; “Josephus’ opening question … frames this pericope” [73]; “The contents of the chiasm can thus be summarized” [76]; “Clauses A and A’ are concerned with…” [77]). For this reviewer, this section (especially 64–78) presents a sluggish read in significant contrast with the rest of the book.

Chapter 4, an adaptation and expansion of a previously published article (“Sculpture, Space, and the Poetics of Idolatry in Josephus’ Bellum Judaicum,” JSJ 39 [2008]: 170–91), strikes a very different tone and feels the most self-contained of any portion in the volume. This chapter showcases some of von Ehrenkrook’s greatest insights, while also demonstrating some of the book’s more confusing attributes: an inconsistent treatment of
analytical categories (e.g., “Greco-Roman” and “Greekness”; see above) and the need for further theoretical depth.

More broadly, the terms “identity” and “religion”/“religious” remain largely unquestioned. These categories, which play significant parts in von Ehrenkrook’s argument, have increasingly been scrutinized in the academic study of religion, cultural studies, and the social sciences. Von Ehrenkrook’s uses of the term “identity” include: “Jewish identity,” “Greek identity,” “ethnic identity,” “religious identity,” “ethno-religious identity,” “dual identity,” and even “the very identity of the city itself.” Overall, von Ehrenkrook’s method clearly eschews an essentialist approach to identity, but he nevertheless continues to use the term as operative. For example, in von Ehrenkrook’s analysis, “Jewish identity” appears to be Josephus’s primary object of complex negotiation, while “Greek identity” feels static and monolithic (see ch. 4 in particular). Here the book would benefit from consideration of, for example, Jean-François Bayart’s insight that “[t]here is no such thing as identity, only operational acts of identification.” Similarly, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper question the validity of “identities” that are paradoxically both reified and “fluid” (as they are in Sculpting Idolatry).

While “identity” receives some indirect problematizing in the work (via “Jewish identity”), “religion” remains completely unchallenged—a point that undermines the book’s critical edge in other areas. Although von Ehrenkrook occasionally describes what he means by “cultic activities” (e.g., 124–25), he regularly deploys the highly contested terms “religion,” “religiosity,” or “religious.” One finds reference to “religious art,” “a religious context,” “religious devotion,” “religious landmarks,” “religious ideology,” “religious objects,” “strictly religious function,” “religious attitude,” and “religious error.” In his comparison between Josephus’s Moses and Plutarch’s Numa, von Ehrenkrook describes Moses and the politeia of the Jews as “a repository of pure religiosity” (143). The laws of Numa in Plutarch, similarly, “reflect the purest expression of religiosity” (161). As critics of this category might inquire, if religion is paired with art, piety, laws, landmarks, objects, and ideology, what precisely does the category describe?

Categorical unclarity stems to a large extent from theoretical imprecision. Leaving aside the brief mention of Homi Bhabha toward the end, theory makes only one prominent

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3. “Jewish identity” occurs throughout. “Greek identity” is concentrated in chapter 4. Examples of “ethnic identity,” “religious identity,” “ethno-religious identity,” “dual identity,” and “the very identity of the city itself” include, respectively, 38, 15, 125, 177, 126.
6. Examples of these may be found, respectively, on the following pages: 138, 71, 137, 121, 35, 124, 118, 166, 159 n. 92. Some of these examples occur elsewhere in the book as well.
appearance in the book, in the opening pages of chapter 4. This three-page portion addresses the theorization of “space,” and “sacred space” in particular. Von Ehrenkrook devotes a paragraph to Mircea Eliade, which he then contrasts with a brief discussion of the position of Jonathan Z. Smith that “there is nothing that is inherently or essentially clean or unclean, sacred or profane. There are situational or relational categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed” (101, quoting Map Is Not Territory [Leiden: Brill, 1978], 291). Von Ehrenkrook uses the point from Smith to underscore the rhetorical nature of how the boundaries of sacred space are defined, thus setting up his discussion of Josephus’s reversal on this. However, the payoff of his juxtaposition between Eliade and Smith (essentialism versus functionalism?) remains unclear. As it stands, these theoretical considerations feel a bit like an afterthought, not having much impact on von Ehrenkrook’s broader analysis or conceptualization.

Though the book may be somewhat uneven in its structure and occasionally imprecise, von Ehrenkrook nevertheless offers a number of compelling insights. This book participates in a scholarly shift away from “face value” readings of ancient Jewish and Christian texts, which often serve as ideological scaffolds for contemporary agendas. Von Ehrenkrook shines in his careful and detailed readings of Josephus’s (and other authors’) “rhetorical subtlety” with well-chosen passages discussed throughout. His work underscores the importance of methodological diversity and the use of both theoretical insights and material culture to reassess ancient texts, even if there is room for improvement on this point. In short, the book is an important contribution to discussions of Josephus’s place vis-à-vis Rome, early Judaism, and the ancient Mediterranean more broadly. The work would serve as a helpful addition to a graduate seminar on such themes.