

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY OF JOSEPHUS
FOR THE HISTORICITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. Steve Mason, in *Josephus and the New Testament. Second Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2003) [henceforth, “Mason,” and/or page number, where applicable], makes a strong case for taking Josephus as an author in his own right and not just as a source for the historical background of the New Testament [“NT”]. Mason has definite views on how to interpret Josephus: pivotal here are Josephus’ literary aims, to which many “facts” can take a back seat. In “ancient thinking,” “Truth had to do with the points that needed making now . . .” [120]; “historical precision was not among Josephus’ main concerns” [124]. “In the spirit of the age, which we also find among the gospel writers, [Josephus] shows not the slightest hesitation in changing details or disregarding precision altogether in the interest of making his present rhetorical points” [131].

2. Mason draws implications for NT interpretation: “[Josephus’] accounts help us to sharpen our awareness of the NT authors’ literary aims, and to realize that they too do not represent objective facts but rather interpretations of facts” [209]. Regarding Josephus’ blatantly contradictory accounts of Ananus, Mason says: “Evidently, consistency does not matter to Josephus; everything serves his present rhetorical needs” [241]. Josephus’ purposes have to do with winning further sympathy for, and understanding of, Jews, among a Gentile audience already well-disposed to them. This he does through a type of “rhetorical history” (my description) which Mason says “is of the same broad literary type or genre as Luke-Acts” [252]. “[T]he parallels of genre between the two works [of Josephus and of the author of Luke-Acts] illuminate the interpretation of Luke-Acts. . . . [Luke] appears to build his case for Christianity squarely on the foundation of Josephus’ case for Judaism” [300]. “Once we read Josephus historically, we are compelled to read the NT, written by his contemporaries, in the same way. . . . In other words, history is not something behind and outside of the NT, its background, but the NT texts themselves must become subject to historical analysis if we are to rediscover something of first-century realities” [302, the latter being the last line of the book]. As an example, Mason, regarding the census in Luke 2:1-5, Mason says we “want to know how it serves Luke’s story” [302].

3. The purpose of my brief presentation is to reconsider three issues in the NT in light of Mason’s illuminating and provocative book, and to see how this reconsideration might affect our notions about the “historicity” of the NT. We will begin with the simplest issue, the census under Quirinus, then discuss the massacre of the “Holy Innocents” in Matthew, and finally, John the Baptist’s relationship to Jesus, where it seems that we might be dealing not just with secondary details that might not be accurate, but with an important instance of the “theologizing” of history.

4. The issue regarding the census is well-known. There was a famous census administered by Quirinus the governor of Syria in 6 C.E. [Mason 172]. The census led to the revolt by Judas the “Galilean,” and it “plays a crucial role in both the *War* and the *Antiquities*” [273]; this is because “Josephus places great emphasis on this early rebellion as a prototype of the later revolt” [274]. Luke 2:2-3 speaks of a “first census (or registration) when Quirinus was governor of Syria.” Mason discusses at some length how bizarre, really, it would be for everyone to have to travel “each to his own city to be registered” [275-276], but the most significant “fact” is that, “according to Josephus, Quirinus only arrived in Syria in 6 C.E.” [275], and this date cannot be tweaked without “pulling down [Josephus’] whole elaborate chronology of the period” [275]. Acts 5:37 refers to *the* census associated precisely with the rebel “Judas the Galilean” (emphasis in Mason 276). “History,” then, knows of a census around 6 C.E. which led to rebellion; there is no historical evidence outside of Luke 2:2-3 for a prior, “worldwide,” census, some ten earlier around the time when Jesus was born. A scholarly interpretation for this would be that: a) Luke wants to find a reason for Mary and Joseph to have to leave Nazareth and go to Bethlehem as she is about to give birth (cf. Matt 2:1-23), and b) wants to allude to a famous event under the great emperor Augustus in order to place Jesus’ birth in an approximate date and in a worldwide setting.

5. The “massacre of the Innocents,” like the above census, is also only attested in one gospel, Matt 2:16-18. Mason [160] states that

The atmosphere of this story fits well with Josephus’ descriptions of Judean life under Herod and Archelaus: many Jews at that time lived in great fear, and any rival claimant to the title ‘King of the Jews’ would have been ruthlessly exterminated. Such a story would have resonated with people living in the region who knew the Herodian legacy. It is strange, though, that Josephus does not mention any slaughter of male children near Bethlehem, right at the end of Herod’s reign where his account is most detailed. Such a monstrous action could hardly have escaped public notice.

Josephus may not have had reason to mention this event in the *War*, but in the *Antiquities* he “goes into all sorts of grisly details about [Herod’s] rule . . . In this context, in which he dwells on even less dramatic infractions of the law, it would plainly have served his purpose to mention a massacre of infants; that would have been Herod’s basest action.” NT scholars would point to Matthew’s penchant for “midrash”: his gospel is full of recycling of “Old Testament” [OT] themes, like the “Star of Jacob” (Num 24:16-17) and Ps 72:10-11 in the visit of the Magi, and in Matt 2:16-18 Jesus’ birth would echo Moses’ and the slaughter of male children in Exod 1:15-22, and (through the ‘convulsion’ of all Jerusalem in Matt 2:3) it would be connected to Jesus’ messianic entry in Matt 21:10 to meet his fate, the whole city being again ‘convulsed’.¹ So here, too, we have a gross “tweaking” of “facts,” to say the least, and not a precise historical record, all in the interest of serving the gospel writer’s theologico-literary aims (Jesus fulfills the OT, he is the anti-type to OT types, etc.).

¹ Although different Greek words are used for ‘convulsion’.

6. We have had Ferry Susanto's fine presentation about John the Baptist in Josephus. The Baptist and Jesus are not connected, and there has been no interpolation to attempt such a connection, leading to the greater reliability of these passages in this regard. Ferry, quoting John P. Meier, *Jesus. A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol. Two, Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (The Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 66, says that "Separated by time, space, and placement in [*Antiquities*] Book 18, Jesus and John the Baptist (in that order) have absolutely nothing to do with each other in the mind and narrative of Josephus."

7. There is one undeniable connection between the Baptist and Jesus: Jesus was baptized by John. This fact could not have been invented by the gospels: it was problematic, even embarrassing, for believers in a sinless Jesus who had no need of conversion or cleansing.² There is an obvious development in how it is presented. In Mark, the earliest gospel, Jesus simply goes to be baptized by John and there is no dialogue between them; the vision and heavenly voice follow in a redacted passage full of OT echoes (see also the Baptist's statement in Mark 1:7). In Matthew, John protests that Jesus should baptize him, but the Matthean theme of "righteousness" must be fulfilled, etc. In Luke, where the Baptist belongs to the old order (Luke 16:16), John is out of the scene and in prison when Jesus, sort of "by the way," and seemingly without the intervention or presence of the Baptist, is baptized along with all the people. In the Fourth Gospel, the only echo of Jesus' baptism is the reference to the Spirit (like a dove?) coming down upon and remaining with Jesus. The "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" would have no need for baptism.

8. If the Baptist had considered his mission to be over once he had (reluctantly!) baptized Jesus, several things are hard to explain. Jesus seems to continue a baptism ministry in John 3:22. Even if Jesus himself did not baptize, but his disciples (John 4:2), what kind of pre-redemption ritual was this? The Q source presents the Baptist's doubts about Jesus, Q 7:18-19.³ Disciples of the Baptist and of Jesus exist side by side, with different practices on prayer and fasting; there is here no evidence that the Baptist has disbanded his disciples because he has now "seen the One who is to come" and considers his mission to thus be over. Finally, in Acts 18:25, even a learned Jew like Apollos knew only "the baptism of John" before being informed of Jesus' "Way." And although the Baptist is said to have predicted the One who would baptize with Holy Spirit and fire (Q 3:16; cf. Mark 1:8), at least some of those baptized into his baptism had never even heard of the Holy Spirit, Acts 19:1-5. As Mason [220] states

This unassimilated tradition [in Acts 19:1-5] suggests, therefore: a) that John's followers survived his death, were still known as an independent group, and had spread to Asia by

² If, as Luke 3:21 implies, Jesus was one of the many people being baptized by John, there would be no specific knowledge of this by Josephus and thus no reason to single out this particular "baptizee" or to make a connection here between Jesus and John.

³ This is shorthand for 'the Q saying (common to Matthew and Luke) as found in Luke, which better preserves the original order in Q'.

the middle of the first century, and b) that John's teaching was not predicated upon either the arrival of Jesus or a future Spirit-immersion.

9. The gospels, it seems, have thus turned a problematic, embarrassing fact, that of Jesus' undeniable baptism by John, into part of "salvation history." Jesus was the Messiah, and the Messiah, in the Jewish tradition, had a forerunner. This forerunner became identified with Elijah, already in Mal 3:23, which gives the messenger/angel of Mal 3:1 the identity of Elijah; see also Sir 48:10. Now, in the synoptics John is identified with Elijah, Matt 17:10-13; cf. Mark 9:11-13; Luke 1:17 (but see Acts 3:19-21, where it is Jesus who is held up in heaven and who will come for the *apokatástasis* ["restoration"] which is Elijah's role in LXX Mal 3:23). In the Fourth Gospel, John denies he is Elijah, John 1:21.

10. We know that the gospels do not agree in details and that certain things are condensed or rearranged, for particular presentations to different communities, etc. (see, e.g., the 1964 *Instruction on the Historicity of the Gospels*). The date of the census in Luke may be a minor detail; the massacre of the infants appears to be a more significant issue. But whether John the Baptist was connected to Jesus beyond being the one who baptized him, remaining thereafter on the scene as a doubter and perhaps even a rival, would seem to be very problematic for determining exactly how much liberty-with-facts has been exercised by the gospel writers. The study of Josephus outlined by Steve Mason and others may make us more aware of just how much interpretation, and ultimately, faith, are needed for a proper understanding of the holy writings.

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