

Josephus and Mark

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The author of our canonical Mark may have been influenced by several texts: Paul's letters (especially Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and 1 Thessalonians), Josephus's *Antiquities* Book 18, and the Septuagint. If so, there will be significant implications concerning the historicity of Mark's John the Baptist narratives, the dating of canonical Mark, and Mark's compositional practices. I here take up the Josephus possibility. There are two principal Markan passages.

The Introduction of John at the beginning of the Gospel, Mk 1:4-6:

- There are several thematic similarities between Mk's narrative of JB's baptism and proclamation and Josephus's account of the same (see the table on the next page). These similarities need to be explained.
- There are significant differences between Mk's narrative of JB's baptism and proclamation and Josephus's account of the same. These differences can be explained if Mark used Josephus for his model and then Christianized John to serve his (Mark's) rhetorical ends.
- There is a chronological incongruity. Josephus seems (1) to place John's baptism after Jesus's activity and (2) to date John's death in 36 CE, which is several years later than the NT seems to date his activity and death.

The Death of John in Mk 6:14-29:

- The number of specific details within these similarities are striking, and suggest dependence. Moreover, the fact that Josephus's *Antiquities* 18 is the only extant source that includes narrative material on the Herodian family, a Philip, Herod Antipas, Herod Antipas and Herodias's relationship, John's criticism of this relationship, John's baptism, arrest, imprisonment, and death strongly suggest dependence one way or the other. If, for example, Mark did not know and use *Antiquities* 18, this would mean that he must have had access to and used some other source material for these narrative components of John's baptism and death including specific details about the Herodian family – including ambiguity about a Philip – and John's baptism, arrest, and death that is extremely similar in content to, if not identical to, *Antiquities* 18. So far, we know of no such source.

Some of the Implications:

- Historicity of John the Baptist narratives in Mark
- Dating of the composition of Mark
- Contribution to understanding more about the final author of Mark's compositional practices.

| Josephus's Antiquities Book 18 | Narrative Theme | Mark |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| John Surnamed the Baptist | John's name | John the Baptist (1:4) |
| Jews and others too | Attracts audiences | All in Judea, the Jerusalemites |
| Exhorted Jews to join in baptism | John's proclamation | Proclaiming a baptism |
| Aroused by his sermons | John was persuasive | All baptized, confessing sins |
| When others joined the crowds | Herod disturbed | By what he heard from John |
| "a good man" | John was . . . | "a good and holy man" |
| Brought in chains to Machaerus | John's arrest | "after John had been arrested" |
| Relationship detailed | Herod and Herodias | Relationship briefly mentioned |
| Was previously married | Her previous marriage | Was previously married |
| Herod II (correct) | Her previous husband | Philip (incorrect) |
| Herodias's daughter's husband | Philip | Herodias' first husband |
| Traditional/religious reasons | Marriage criticized for | Traditional/religious reasons |
| Implicit reference | Lev 18:16, 20 | Implicit reference |
| Fear of future sedition | Reason for arrest | Criticism of marriage |
| Identified as Salome | Herodias's daughter | Not named |

Discussion

After the EGL Meeting

Question: The Herods were public figures. John's movement, Mark and Josephus agree, was also public. Are not both relying on common knowledge, whence the many similarities in their accounts, but with varying emphasis? As an example of varying emphasis ("reason for arrest"), criticizing Herod's marital irregularities was seditious, since it challenged the legitimacy of his rule. Is it likely that Mark knew nothing of these matters, went to Josephus to learn of them, and then miscopied Josephus?

The Author: It does not follow that the detailed narrative material in Mark and Josephus was public / common knowledge. If it were common knowledge, why is it that our only extant sources of this detailed narrative material are Mark and Josephus? As the table above indicates, Philip is just one of the many similar themes in the John the Baptist narratives between Mark and Josephus. Josephus's description of Herod Antipas's brother Philip just prior to his explanation of Herodias's first husband Herod, who was also a brother of Antipas (*Ant* 18:106-110), is obscure enough for a sometimes inexact reader and writer like Mark to confuse Philip with Herod.

There are reasonable reasons why Josephus would not use Mark as his source. I am not aware of reasonable reasons why Mark would not use Josephus.