

Jesus and the “Egyptian Prophet”

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, John 18:3 and 18:12 state that Jesus on the Mount of Olives was confronted by a speira – a Roman cohort of 500 to 1000 soldiers. This suggestion of a battle preceding Jesus’ arrest is reminiscent of an event described by Josephus in the 50s (A.J. 20.169-172; B.J. 2.261-263), involving the so called “Egyptian Prophet”. This messianic leader – who had previously spent time “in the wilderness” – has “advised the multitude... to go along with him to the Mount of Olives”, where he “would show them from hence how, at his command, the walls of Jerusalem would fall down”. Procurator Felix, however, sent a cohort of soldiers to the Mount of Olives, where they defeated the “Egyptian Prophet”. Although the twenty-year time difference would seem to make all comparisons futile, there are other coinciding aspects: The preceding messianic leader named by Josephus, Theudas (A.J. 20.97-99), shares distinct characteristics with John the Baptist: Like John, Theudas gathered his followers by the river Jordan, and, like John, he was arrested by the authorities, and they “cut off his head, and carried it to Jerusalem”. Curiously, although the names of dignitaries may differ, comparing the New Testament accounts with Josephus’ accounts of the mid-40s to early 50s in several respects appears to be more productive than a comparison with his accounts of the 30s: It is in this later period, not the 30s, that Josephus describes the activity and crucifixion of robbers (absent between 6 and 44 C.E.), a conflict between Samaritans and Jews, two co-reigning high priests, a procurator killing Galileans, an attack on someone named Stephen outside Jerusalem, and at least ten more seemingly parallel events. Importantly, these are parallels that, judging by Josephus, appear to be absent in the 30s. The significance of this will be discussed.