

DID JOHN THE BAPTIST EXIST?

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AS the historical existence of John the Baptist is now also denied, and as a first-century secular testimony to him is declared "a shameless interpolation,"¹ it surely is not out of place to lay that testimony in full before skeptical readers, together with a comparison of it with the accounts of the gospels, in order to see whether it is independent and genuine or not.

In the *Antiquities* of Josephus (XVIII, 5) we read: "At this time [about 34 A. D. according to the preceding paragraph] Aretas, the king of Petra, and Herod had a quarrel for the following reason. Herod, the tetrarch, had married the daughter of Aretas and had already lived with her a long time. But on the way to Rome he stopped with Herod his brother, though not of the same mother, for this Herod was born of the daughter of Simon the highpriest. Now he [the tetrarch] fell in love with Herodias, the wife of this Herod, a daughter of Aristobulos, their brother, and a sister of Agrippa the Great. He therefore dared to talk about marriage to her. Since she accepted his proposal, they agreed that she change her abode and come to him as soon as he would leave Rome. It was also arranged that he should divorce the daughter of Aretas, and so he sailed for Rome, having made this agreement. But when he returned, after having accomplished the business in Rome for which he had set out, his wife, having found out his agreement with Herodias before he knew that she had learned everything, asked him to send her to Machærus on the border of the land of Aretas and Herod, but did not betray her design. So Herod sent her out, thinking she had not perceived anything. But because she had previously sent to Machærus, which was tributary both to Herod and her father, and everything had been prepared for the journey by the general, as soon as she arrived she set out to Arabia under the escort of several generals in succession, and came to her father as

¹ These words are cited from Grätz (*History of the Jews*, 1888, III, 278) in a footnote by Drews (*Christ Myth*, p. 129). I have looked up Grätz (English translation, 1893) and cannot find them anywhere. Grätz in that translation rather assumes the Baptist to be historical.

quickly as possible and told him of the intentions of Herod. But Aretas made this a cause of hostilities together with the boundaries in the land of Gamalitis, and both gathered armies and came to war, sending their generals instead of themselves. In the ensuing battle Herod's whole army was destroyed on account of the treachery of some fugitives who had set out with him from the tetrarchy of Philip. This Herod wrote to Tiberius. But the latter, enraged at the attempt of Aretas, wrote Vitellius to make war and either capture him alive and put him in bonds, or kill him and send his head to him.

"But to some of the Jews it appeared that the destruction of Herod's army was brought about by God as a very just retribution for the murder of John called the Baptist. For Herod had killed him, a good man who commanded the Jews to practice virtue and to follow righteousness towards each other and piety towards God, and to come to baptism. For thus baptism would appear acceptable to God, if not used as a propitiation for sins, but as the purification of the body, inasmuch as the soul had been previously purified by righteousness. Now when all the others assembled in crowds—for they were greatly carried away by hearing his words—Herod, fearing that his persuasion to such a degree over the people might lead to some uprising, for they seemed likely to do anything on his advice, thought it would be much better to capture him before he should bring about any innovation, and to put him out of the way, than to repent after difficulties had arisen from a change of things. And thus through the suspicion of Herod he was sent bound to Machærus, the castle mentioned before, and there put to death. But to the Jews the destruction of the army appeared to be a retribution for this deed in that God wished to punish Herod."

This is the report of Josephus on John the Baptist. Now to compare this report with the accounts of the gospels.

1. According to Mark vi. 17, the husband of Herodias is Philip (evidently the tetrarch of Gaulanitis and Trachonitis is meant), the son of Herod the Great by Cleopatra. According to Josephus it is another Herod, a son of Herod the Great by Mariamne. Philip, instead of being the husband of Herodias as Mark states, was the husband of Salome, who according to Josephus (*Ant.* XVIII, 5, 4) was the daughter of Herodias by her divorced husband.

2. If this was the Salome meant by the gospels, she could not very well have been "a little girl,"² as in Mark, dancing at the birth-

² *κόρῃσιον*. Some manuscripts have "the daughter of Herod, Herodias," as if noticing the error.

day of Herod. Her husband Philip died 34 A. D., about the time the troubles started between Herod and Aretas (compare *Ant.* XVIII, 5, 6).

3. According to the gospels the beheading of John takes place at Tiberias, the residence of Herod. This is surely meant by the words of Mark: "Herod made at his birthday a banquet to his lords, captains and the first men of Galilee." Tiberias was the residence of Herod according to Josephus. In the *Antiquities* John is executed at Machærus.

4. According to the gospels Herodias is the cause of John's death. According to Josephus Herod executes him for fear that he might stir up a revolt.

5. Herod could never have promised half of his kingdom to the girl, because he held his kingdom subject to Roman control. The gospel account is very probably a popular legend as it arose gradually among the people and the early Christians.

On the other hand the gospels and Josephus agree in this, that John is a great preacher and practices baptism, though the nature of his preaching and the meaning of his baptism are stated differently in the two sources. The eschatological character connected with John's preaching is wanting in Josephus.

We further find in Josephus an indirect testimony in agreement with the gospels concerning the locality of John's preaching. The gospels say that the Baptist preached in the Judean desert, i. e., east of Jerusalem towards the Dead Sea and the country around the Jordan.³ This agrees with Josephus that Herod not only had jurisdiction in Galilee but also in Perea (comp. *Ant.*, XVIII, 7, 1 and *Jewish Wars*, II, 9, 1). From this we see why it is just at Machærus, east of the Dead Sea, that John is imprisoned. This was near the locality of his preaching.

The possibility that a Christian interpolator should have written the account about the Baptist in Josephus is, as far as I can see, absolutely excluded. Nobody who had the gospel accounts before him could have written a passage with such glaring contradictions to those of the gospels. We might rather say that the gospel story is a further legendary elaboration concerning the causes of John's death on the basis of the popular hatred against Herod and Herodias of which Josephus speaks. Not only do the people see in Herod's defeat a divine retribution according to Josephus, but he himself at other places expresses his strong condemnation of Herodias. In *Ant.*, XVIII, 5, 4, he speaks of her as "confounding the laws of

³ *περίχωρος τοῦ Ἰορδάνου.*

our country and divorcing herself from her husband while he was alive, marrying Herod," and in *Ant.*, XVIII, 7, he writes a long chapter about the intrigues of this ambitious woman. He relates that when Agrippa, her brother, became king, she continually harassed her husband to seek the kingship in Rome also. The consequence was that when Herod finally yielded to her, he not only lost his tetrarchy by the counter-intrigues of Agrippa, but was also banished to Lyons, Gaul. Josephus, though relating the redeeming trait of this intriguing and ambitious woman, that she shared her husband's exile voluntarily, telling emperor Cajus (Caligula), she would not forsake Herod in his misfortune, having been his partner in prosperity, closes his account with the words: "Thus did God punish Herodias for her envy of her brother and Herod also for giving ear to the vain discourses of a woman." It seems more probable that the gospel account, which lays the greatest blame on Herodias in regard to John's death, is an outgrowth from the popular opinion in which this woman was held and of which Josephus gives such a strong reflection, than that a Christian interpolator should have written the account of the Baptist in Josephus. We may also remark here that while Origen knows nothing of a passage in Josephus with reference to Christ, he is acquainted with the reference to John the Baptist.

The relations of Herod Antipas to the death of John the Baptist had an indirect bearing also upon the final fate of Jesus. Luke tells us (ix. 7-9) that Herod, when hearing of the work of Jesus in his dominions and what the people said about John having risen again from the dead was wrought up about it, and that a warning was given to Jesus through some Pharisees to leave Galilee as Herod intended to kill him (xiii. 31). This was toward the end of the career of Jesus in Galilee. Evidently the tetrarch (Jesus treats those Pharisees as emissaries of Herod) wished to get rid of him without soiling his hands with another murder.

John's existence would probably never have been denied if a similar deifying process had not taken place later with regard to his personality as with that of his contemporary Jesus. In the syncretic system of the Mandæans (from Aramæan *Manda*, knowledge, enlightenment) or Sabæans (Aramæan *saba*, to baptize) John has become the last incarnation of *Manda de Hajje*, i. e., the knowledge or enlightenment of life, "the beloved son" of *Manarabba*, i. e., the great *Mana* (comp. either Iranic *manas* or Arabic *mana* in the sense of mind or spirit), the god of light and knowledge. But probably *Manarabba* is ultimately only a form for the more ancient Baby-

lonian god *Hea* or *Hoa*, who dwells in the ocean, his holiest element, and who according to the ancient legend arose under a fishlike form from the sea, the Persian Gulf, near which the Mandæans live, to bring knowledge to mankind. The Babylonian priest Berosus, who translated this myth into Greek, calls that being by the Hellenized form *Oannes*.

But originally the ocean, in which *Hoa* dwells, was meant to be the heavenly ocean, an idea which recurs in the Mandæan system under the name *Ajar-Jora*, i. e., the heavenly Jordan. *Ajar* = Greek *aër*, air, a word early taken into the Aramæan languages.⁴

Because the often repeated baptism of the Mandæans is a theurgical-magical act which aims at a continually growing insight into the secrets of the realms of light and knowledge by interposition of the elements of *Mana rabba*, the king of light, namely water, John the Baptist was assumed to be the last incarnation of *Mana rabba's* son, *Manda de Hajje*, who answers to the personified divine wisdom of the Old Testament (comp. Prov. viii. 23), the pre-existent, heavenly Christ of Jewish apocryphal and rabbinical literature and of Paul, and to the divine *Logos* of Philo and the fourth gospel. John the Baptist as the last incarnation of this *Manda de Hajje* thus became the eponymic hero of the gnostic baptism of the Mandæans.

The Hellenized form *Oannes* used by Berosus for *Hoa* has philologically no connection with the Hellenized form *Joannes* used in the New Testament for John the Baptist, and even if it had, it would not disprove John's historical reality and make him originally a god, any more than the original mythical divinities Gunther and Brunhilda, occurring in the *Niebelungenlied*, disprove the historical existence of a Burgundian king Gunther actually destroyed by Attila and likewise of a historical Burgundian queen Brunhilda, who met a tragic fate. Both of these characters were unquestionably worked up into that epic, just as John the Baptist has been in the complicated system of the Mandæans. And if John has been worked into that system, Jesus, who can not be disconnected from him and has been worked up in the Christian system in a similar way, must likewise be a historical reality. The existence of both stand and fall together.

⁴The present-day Mandæans imagine heaven as being formed of the purest water, but which at the same time is so hard that no diamond can cut it.