

HOW JOSEPHUS REALLY VIEWED JESUS

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Abstract: This paper aims to see how Josephus viewed Jesus, his comparative figures and see if Jesus fits the categorization of a “Sign Prophet” evidenced in Josephus. The category was established by earlier scholars such as Barnett. The inception and purpose of the movements initiated by various sign prophets, will serve as a matrix for the Jesus movement. According to Josephus Jesus gathered two groups to himself before he got executed. As careless as Josephus was, he would have given a reason for the crucifixion. This excised reason could have been a typical eschatological sign such as other Sign Prophets promised. Jesus gathering a crowd and leading them to Jerusalem ending in execution, was typical of these charismatic prophets in this time period. This examination requires a careful reading of the *Testimonium Flavianum* (TF), as well as a comparative reading with other Sign Prophet passages.

Keywords: Josephus. *Testimonium Flavianum*. TF Variants. Sign Prophets. Historical Jesus.

Cómo veía Flavio Josefo realmente a Jesús

Resumen: Este trabajo tiene por objeto comprender cómo Josefo veía a Jesús, cómo a sus figuras comparativas y constatar si Jesús encaja en la categoría de “profeta de signos” evidenciada por el propio Josefo. La categoría de profeta de signos ha sido establecida con anterioridad por estudiosos como Barnett. El inicio y el propósito de los movimientos iniciados por varios profetas de signos servirán como matriz para analizar el movimiento de Jesús. Según Josefo, Jesús reunió a dos grupos de seguidores antes de ser ejecutado. Por muy negligente que fuera Josefo, tal hecho sería motivo para la crucifixión de Jesús. Esta razón en sí podría haber sido un signo escatológico típico, tal y como habían prometido otros Profetas de Signos. Jesús

reunió a una multitud y los condujo a Jerusalén, terminando con su ejecución, un hecho típico de tales profetas carismáticos en este período de tiempo. Este examen requiere una lectura minuciosa del *Testimonium Flavianum* (TF), así como una lectura comparativa con otros pasajes de profetas de signos.

Palabras clave: Josefo. *Testimonium Flavianum*. Variantes de TF. Profetas de signos. Jesús histórico.

1. The Testimonium Flavianum and its place in Josephus works

It is vital to do a quick summary of the latest scholarship on the *Testimonium Flavianum* (TF) as a preliminary of this comparative study. A fraction of the scholarship from the main specialists, will suffice for our study here. I will begin by noting that John P. Meier recognised an earlier form of the TF but merely cut out the Christian bits that Josephus could not have written¹. Here are the three Christian phrases that he cut out – “if indeed one should call him a man”, “he was the Christ” and “For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wondrous things about him”. When these are cut out the TF becomes quite vacuous. Looking at the TF without those phrases, it becomes obvious that a Christian scribe not only added those phrases but he had also covered up other phrases. This can be seen by examining the variants of the TF and by comparing the TF with other Sign Prophet passages.

Let us first examine the variants of the TF as quoted down through the generations. The TF takes a lot of untangling and to do this properly we are going to have to peel back the layers and start at the final fourth redaction which is what we find in the *textus receptus* (the received text as found in *Antiquities*).

1) The first layer: The final (fourth) redaction is the *Textus Receptus* (received text in *Antiquities*). Taking one example this redaction has the phrase “he was the Christ”.

2) The second layer: I will use Whealey’s scholarship to find the middle (third) redaction: the evidence from Whealey will uncover how Eusebius originally wrote the example phrase I took in layer one. This is what Eusebius originally wrote: “he was thought to be the Christ”. This is close to the following variants – Jerome, Rufinus and Michael the Syrian recen-

¹ MEIER, *Marginal Jew*, 60-61.

sions. It was Whealey that tracked the sources for both Michael the Syrian and Agapius' Arabic recension. She determined that Michael the Syrians quotation was closer to Josephus' original than the Arabic recension². Michael's was a literal copy as opposed to Agapius which happens to be a paraphrase. Both recensions had a common source – Theophilus of Edessa. Theophilus in turn used the Syriac *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The implication of this is that these two variants of the TF really only go back to a version Eusebius originally had as both recensions stem from Eusebius' work, the Syriac *Historia Ecclesiastica* (The Syriac version of Eusebius' *History*). According to David Allen this recension of the TF is known as the middle redaction as he has tracked at least three redactions of the TF³. As stated by Allen, "In a response to Ken Olson, Whealey was under the impression that the original TF is only minimally different from the *textus receptus*. Ironically it was from her brilliant scholarship that this minimally changed version was proved to be from the hand of Eusebius⁴!" Ken Olson's scholarship has left no doubt that Eusebius tampered with the TF even though his arguments are not enough to show the TF was created *ex nihilo* by Eusebius⁵. This gets us closer to how Eusebius tampered with the TF.

It was Pollard that had said "the Latin manuscripts are generally much earlier than the surviving copies of the Greek original, meaning that we need to know the Latin before we can restore Josephus' Greek⁶". Firstly, Jerome used Eusebius' *History* when he reproduced his version of the TF: "that Eusebius Pamphilus in the ten books of his *Church History* has been of the utmost assistance" (*De Viris Illustribus* 13). This recension is earlier than the *textus receptus* (received text of *Antiquities*). Jerome's recension has "he was believed to be Christ" which is what Eusebius originally wrote into the TF. This makes it clear the *textus receptus* as found in *Antiquities* is the final redaction which was changed after Eusebius. We can track this by noting Eusebius originally had the phrase "he was thought or believed to be Christ" (middle redaction) as opposed to "he was the Christ" (final redaction) which is in the *textus receptus*. For the second Latin witness we will now examine Rufinus. David B. Levenson and Thomas R. Martin observed:

² WHEALEY, "Testimonium Flavianum in Syriac and Arabic", 573-590.

³ ALLEN, "A Proposal", 211-232.

⁴ *Ib.*, 212, see also WHEALEY, "Josephus, Eusebius of Caesarea", 115-116.

⁵ OLSON, "A Eusebian Reading", 97-114. To see a disputation of Olsen's *ex nihilo* arguments, see ALLEN, "Model Reconstruction", 114-117.

⁶ POLLARD, "The *De excidio*", 65-100 [72].

“By far the most interesting variant in the texts we are discussing [Rufinus translation of Eusebius] is the reading *et credebatur esse Christus* [he was believed to be Christ] for *Christus hic erat* [he was the Christ], which is found in two manuscripts of Rufinus currently in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek: Clm 6383 from the late eighth century and Clm 6381 from the early ninth century”.

Now that we have discussed the relevant recensions for this second layer, we can now move onto the pre-Eusebian strata of the TF, i. e. the third layer.

3) The third layer: The pre-Eusebian (second) redaction is shown from the following variants – Origen, *De Excidio* and the *Slavonic*. These variants are missing the example phrase taken in layer one and layer two. They are missing the phrases, “he was the Christ” or “he was thought to be the Christ”. These three variants will expose a pre-Eusebian strata in the TF. The first is Origen. As *Contra Cels.* 1.47 contradicts the TF statement that ‘he was the Christ’ showing that this statement was not in the earlier version of the TF. As noted by Zvi Baras, Origen contradicts what Eusebius wrote into the TF, [“he was believed or thought to be the Christ”] which shows, “a clear contradiction cannot be pushed aside; one is therefore bound to conclude that the text of the *Testimonium* was tampered with – a conclusion corroborated also by modern scholarship⁸”. Origen did not see the line Eusebius had in his reproduced TF, “he was thought to be the Christ”. Other observances we may take out of *Contra Cels.* 1.47: – 1) “Christ, who was a prophet” – Jesus described as a prophet or as Josephus would have described him – a pseudoprophet. 2) “the Jews having put him to death” – Powerful Jews plotted against him. 3) “since they put to death Christ” – They succeeded in having him executed. 4) the line “he was the Christ” was not in the passage.

The second witness to use a version of the TF before Eusebian tampering was Pseudo-Hegesippus’ quotation in his book *De excidio urbis Hierosolymitanae* 2.12 (“On the ruin of the city of Jerusalem”). According to Paget, “The importance of this reference lies in the fact that Pseudo-Hegesippus writes independently of Eusebius. This is made clear by the fact that he refers to Josephus’ account of John the Baptist after the TF, following the Josephan order and not the Eusebian order as we find it in *HE*, and at an earlier point in the same book (2.4, *cf Ant.* 18.3.4) refers to the Paulina incident which Eusebius never mentions⁹.” Nussbaum notices some parallels of Pseudo-Hegesippus reference and Origen’s:

⁷ LEVENSON – MARTIN, “The Latin Translations”, 1-79 (25).

⁸ BARAS, “The *Testimonium Flavianum*”, 339-340.

⁹ PAGET, “Some Observations”, 566-567.

In *De excidio Hierosolymitano* 2:12, Pseudo-Hegesippus paraphrases the TF, omitting the statement that Jesus was the Christ. He then vehemently criticises Josephus that he testified of Jesus, but did not believe in him as the Christ. It can be concluded that Pseudo-Hegesippus must have read a kind of TF, otherwise he would not have screamed that Josephus did not believe despite his report on Jesus. The situation is reminiscent of Origen writings – he wrote that Josephus did not believe in the messiahship of Jesus¹⁰.

We will now examine the third witness that used a source before Eusebian tampering. John Curran who examined the Latin texts of the TF, has shown this more primitive version of the TF went east¹¹. I see the more primitive version of the TF made its way east and influenced the insertions of the *Slavonic*. There are numerous sources to track especially in regard to the additions inserted and added to Josephus' *War* book by the Russian chronographer in creating the *Slavonic*. Apart from Byzantium historians Hamartolus and Malalas, I find a different transmission line going east which would have also influenced those insertions. The reason for this is that it is difficult to explain why the *Slavonic* dropped the name Jesus and title Christ if this passage derived from the same TF that was tempered by Eusebius. The Russian chronographer was highly educated and had lots of sources. One possible source could have been a pre-Eusebian manuscript that went east. This is the third witness of interest that used a version of the TF before Eusebius tampered with it: namely the source of the *Slavonic*. The *Slavonic* has a number of insertions added to its translation and adaption of Josephus' *War*. It is much easier to explain if this variant of the TF used a Greek exemplar circulating in the east that escaped Eusebian tampering. This exemplar did not have the name Jesus or title Christ added. Jesus not being named in an earlier form of the TF is taken from the evidence of the *Slavonic*¹².

4) The fourth layer: The first redaction by a Christian scribe had the phrase: “the Jews, and very many of the gentiles he led to himself”. The motivation for adding that phrase would come about from a gentile-based Christianity. That phrase is a point of agreement with Eusebius and the *Excidio*. This shows that both the *Excidio* and Eusebius used a tampered passage. Ps-Hegesippus' *Excidio* did not use Eusebius. His Christianised document had “leaders of the synagogue confessed him to be god” and would not have dropped the phrase “he was believed to be the Christ”. This is taking into account that the *Excidio* is a paraphrase, it would still not have

¹⁰ NUSSBAUM, “Das Testimonium Flavianum”, 72-82.

¹¹ CURRAN, “Be or to Be Thought to Be”, 71-94.

¹² ALLEN, “A Model Reconstruction”, 125-6.

dropped that phrase. A better explanation is that an already tampered TF was received by both Ps-Hegesippus and Eusebius. This will now expose layer 4. This received version of the TF by both Eusebius and Ps-Hegesippus will be understood by this paper as the first redaction (layer 4), a pre-Eusebian redaction. This is seen from the points of contact, such as the phrase Ps-Hegesippus used before his paraphrase: “However a great part of the Jews, and very many of the gentiles believed in him”. (Ps-Hegesippus, *De excidio* 2.12). Having Jews and Greeks join together in any sort of movement from the time of Herod the Great to the Jewish Roman War 66-70, is extremely unlikely. Steve Mason observed in the run up to the war, the era was marked by “the appearance of charismatic prophets, militants, and sicarii; ... [and] deteriorating relations with Greek cities¹³”. A more likely scenario is that a Christian scribe swapped out *Galilaiou* (“Galilean”) for *Hellēnikou* (“Greek”). The arguments here do not accept Eusebius as the initial person to have tampered the TF. Tampering of the TF has happened before and after Eusebius. The passage received by both Eusebius and Ps-Hegesippus was already tampered with. In examining the TF quote contained in the *Excidio*, the points of agreement with Eusebius show that both used a tampered passage.

5) The fifth layer: Josephus original is the fifth layer. Let us now see how the TF compares to other Sign Prophet passages. Meschersky (Meščerskij) is at a loss of why the *Slavonic* dropped Jesus’ name in the exact TF passage and merely asserts unconvincingly that it was to make it less Christian, unlikely given how Christian the passage already is¹⁴. Josephus sometimes named the Sign Prophets, on Meschersky’s assertion it makes no difference whether Josephus named Jesus or not to make the passage more authentic. As observed by Kate Leeming, “Jesus is rarely referred to by name ... elsewhere he is the “wonderworker” or the “king who did not reign” or some other term. Why would a Christian be reticent about naming Jesus¹⁵?” The *Slavonic* also does not have John the Baptist named in the exact passage inserted into the *Slavonic War*, simply referring to him as the Baptist¹⁶. Again, dropping the name John from a source text used by the *Slavonic* does not make sense unless the source was from a more primitive version of *Antiquities* that did not have the Baptist named and was used for the insertion. The old Russian translator of the *War* obviously knew who the pas-

¹³ MASON (ed.), *Judean War* 2, xv.

¹⁴ LEEMING H. – LEEMING K. (eds.), *Slavonic Version*, 19.

¹⁵ LEEMING K., “The Slavonic Version of Josephus’s Jewish War”, 395.

¹⁶ LEEMING H. – LEEMING K. (eds.), *Slavonic Version*, 248.

sages were about and named Jesus and John at different points. This chronographer had used a more primitive source for the insertions into the *War* that did not originally name Jesus or John. As will be seen from the list of Sign Prophet passages, this was very common for Josephus not to know the names of the sign prophets, after all most were very minor figures. This makes Josephus report on Jesus and John the Baptist much the same as many of the other Sign Prophets. Here Josephus did not know most of the names of these people as they were not famous enough. There are a few exceptions such as Theudas and Jonathan the Weaver. Jonathan's name was known because of a personal accusation made against Josephus by the Lybian governor Catullus. Josephus is accused along with other prominent Jewish leaders of being implicated in the Jonathan plot (*War* 7.488).

2. Let's meet the Sign Prophets!

I will do an expansion of Rebecca Grays list of Jewish sign prophets as reported by Josephus¹⁷:

1. An unnamed figure under Pilate, i. e. Jesus Christ (*Ant.* 18.63-64 – TF)
2. The 'Samaritan' (*Ant.* 18.85-87) also note, Josephus did not know his name and referred to him as "the man".
3. An unnamed Baptist figure who was doing something innovative with a known ritual attracting crowds (*Slavonic II.VII.2(b)*), follows on from *War* 2.110 cf. *Ant.* 18.117-119).
4. Theudas (*Ant.* 20.97-99).
5. a group of unnamed figures active during the procuratorship of Felix (*War* 2.258-60; *Ant.* 20.167-68).
6. the 'Egyptian' (*War* 2.261-63; *Ant.* 20.169-72), Josephus was not aware of his name but only what he was referred to by others.
7. an unnamed figure under Festus (*Ant.* 20.188).
8. another unnamed figure who led his followers to the temple just before it was destroyed in 70 C.E. (*War* 6.283-87).
9. Jonathan, a Sicarius refugee from Palestine who was active in Cyrene after the war (*War* 7.437-50; *Life* 424-25). Josephus found it easier

¹⁷ GRAY, *Prophetic Figures*, 112.

to name this sign prophet as he was a contemporary of Josephus and because of his personal involvement.

The scriptures inspired the Sign Prophets to model themselves on past prophets. These sign prophets in desperate times looked into their scrolls for inspiration, for some, Moses or Joshua were the perfect role models in their battle with Rome. As Dale Allison says of the Egyptian:

If Josephus is close to the facts, this unnamed leader hoped to emulate the achievements of the great Joshua, who, in conquering the Holy Land, saw the walls of a city come tumbling down (Josh 6). But the Egyptian clearly saw himself as more than a new Joshua. For the latter was himself a second Moses, and the unnamed prophet, as we meet him in Josephus, is full of Mosaic traits. His title is "the Egyptian" ... He reckons himself a "prophet" (cf. Deut 18:15, 18; 34:10). He leads a crowd into "the desert" ... And he conducts the people by a circuitous route (Exod 13:18; and esp. LXX Amos 2:10: ... "I led you around in the desert"). Regrettably, we know little more. The Egyptian did, however, wish to set himself up as a king¹⁸.

Paula Fredriksen sees Theudas re-enacting both Moses and Joshua by parting the waters of the Jordan, this the Sign Prophets would enact

key moments in the birth of the nation, these signs prophets signalled the eschatological nearness of final redemption. ... Scriptural authority undergirded not only their own message; it also supported the hopes and convictions of their followers¹⁹.

It was the charisma of the sign prophets that attracted the crowds, a charisma that involved authority through dreams and visions. (People believed the divine actually contacted them from dreams and visions.) These sign prophets were charismatic prophets. Many of these dreams were inspired from scriptures, and the sign was a re-enactment of a scriptural fantasy, a promise of a sign the crowd incredulously believed would happen. Ultimately Jesus would have had a vision inspired from scriptures, as he acted on the vision thinking divine intervention would happen, he gathered a crowd, this in turn ended in his execution. To the modern mindset the crowds gathered by the Sign Prophet would see the sign emanating from a biblical fantasy but to the people of the first century they would have thought of these as biblical realities.

¹⁸ ALLISON, *Constructing Jesus*, 260-261 and n 155.

¹⁹ FREDRIKSEN, *When Christians Were Jews*, 177f.

Crossley and Myles' in their book *Jesus: A Life in Class Conflict* has a revolutionary millennialist framework for Jesus throughout the book, this framework could easily apply to all the other Sign Prophets as well. A promise of a radical transformation of the plight of the poor peasants inaugurating a thousand-year kingdom of God. He uses Theudas as an example:

Theudas who, in the 40s CE, led a popular movement to the River Jordan where he announced he would part the river thereby allowing people to pass over (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.97-99). Why this story might be categorized as "millenarian" is because it envisaged radical transformation through a dramatic action by tapping into well-known themes from Jewish ancestral traditions about Moses (the most important and archetypal organizer of the Israelites) and his exodus from Egypt which involved guiding the enslaved Israelites across a divinely parted Red Sea to their freedom. These traditions were reapplied to the future of Jews living now under the shadow of Roman rule²⁰.

We don't know if Theudas followers were armed or not (*Ant.* 20.97-99), Hengel has suggested on account of the biblical allusions that they were²¹. The crossing of the Jordan could have been modeled on either/or both Moses (Exod. 12:29-14:30) and Joshua (Josh. 3-4). Joshua had crossed and proceeded to military conquest, in Josephus earlier account of Moses, Moses had crossed and was armed by God. As Isaac W. Oliver said: "Later during the governorship of Cuspius Fadus (44–46 CE), Theudas caused a similar commotion [to Judas the Galilean], as he promised to split the Jordan River and lead his followers into freedom²²". This movement was cut down by Fadus who displayed Theudas severed head in Jerusalem. A deterrent like crucifixion against leading a revolt.

John the Baptist was doing something innovative with an existing ritual and gathering a crowd. What John the Baptist does is to take an existing ritual Mikveh, (as seen from all the mikveh baths in Qumran) and innovate it. For a very common purity ritual, John by doing it for others was so distinctive, that the immerser (*baptisma*) became part of his name. Theissen sees the scriptures as the inspiration of John's actions:

First, John's use of the Jordan River may have evoked Elisha's command to Naaman to immerse (*ebaptisato*) himself seven times in the Jordan in order to be purified of his lepra [2 Kings 5:14 Septuagint [hereafter LXX]]. Second, it is possible that people would have associated John's actions with some form of eschatological entrance into the land of promise, since Joshua led

²⁰ CROSSLEY – MYLES, *Jesus: A Life in Class Conflict*, 4-5 (5).

²¹ HENGEL, *Zealots*, 230, n. 5.

²² OLIVER, "Are Luke and Acts Anti-Marcionite? ", 508.

Israel through the Jordan in order to possess the land [Josh. 3:15; LXX uses the verb in reference to the priests entering into the water of the Jordan]²³.

Many of these Sign Prophets have been inspired by the scriptures, the Baptist action of baptising could have been seen as an eschatological sign inspired from scriptures (be pure and Yahweh will come) and this would put him among the Sign Prophets. As we will see, some Sign Prophets groups were armed, some were not, “John the Baptist, though peaceable, was killed by the authorities because of the sway he held over the people, which to them could easily have spilled into sedition²⁴”. “Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion” (*Ant.* 18.118).

The Samaritan sign prophet decided to show the crowd sacred vessels buried by Moses on the sacred site of Mount Gerizim, the site where the Hasmoneans had destroyed the Samaritan’s sacred Temple (*Ant.* 18.85-87). The vessels were probably instruments used for Temple duties and would connect this Samaritan figure to Moses (Deut. 27:1-2). As a side note the gospel of Mark portrays “Jesus as refusing to allow “anyone to carry a vessel through the Temple,” alluding to Zech 14:20. Jesus not allowing anyone to carry “anything” through the Temple seems to refer to sacred vessels – *skeuos* (Mk 11:16)²⁵. Even in the face of danger the crowd still attempted to ascent the mountain – “belief that salvation was at hand outweighed the clear and present dangers of opposing forces²⁶”. Belief was held of divine intervention by both the crowd and leaders. In the slaughter the Samaritan escaped but was hunted to be slain. This is reminiscent of a saying in Mt. 20:28. Under the Sign Prophet hypothesis, all the Sign Prophets risked their lives. While his followers did come armed (*Ant.* 18.86) Josephus tells us that it was only for self-defence as Pilate was known for his violence (*Ant.* 18.88).

Josephus makes a distinction about the Sign Prophets under Felix and the Sicarii, hinting at their religious fervor, “not so impure in their actions” (*War* 2.258). These sign prophets were distinctive in that they all “led their followers into (anticipated) participation in some great liberating action by God²⁷”. The sign prophet under Festus “promised them deliverance and freedom from the miseries they were under” (*Ant.* 20.188).

²³ THEISSEN, *Forces*, 23.

²⁴ FREDRIKSEN, *When Christians Were Jews*, 178.

²⁵ JOSEPH, *Jesus and the Temple*, 115.

²⁶ JOHNSON, “Early Jewish Sign Prophets”, Retrieved from <https://www.cdamm.org/articles>

²⁷ HORSLEY, “Popular Prophetic Movements”, 8.

With the ‘Egyptian’ the great sign promised (and actually believed by his followers) was God would help with insurmountable odds, like penetrating the walls of Jerusalem. The world power of the Romans had a protracted siege in order to penetrate these, the Egyptian simply promised “at his command, the walls of Jerusalem would fall down” (*Ant.* 20.170). From this you can see the scriptural fantasy of re-enactment, that people actually thought this could be replicated.

The Sign Prophet at the Temple in 70CE promising deliverance in the midst of Roman slaughter just shows in desperate times how scriptural fantasy offered false hope (*War* 6.283). Hengel sees the Temple Sign Prophet as one of many appointed by the Zealots to boost peoples morale among the horrors suffering from Roman siege warfare²⁸.

Now, there was then a great number of false prophets suborned by the tyrants to impose on the people, who denounced this to them, that they should wait for deliverance from God; and this was in order to keep them from deserting, and that they might be buoyed up above fear and care by such hopes (*War* 6.286).

Josephus offers a reason why there were so many of these sign prophets saying people were easily ‘persuaded in adversity’: with ‘promises deliverance from the miseries’ so that they are a ‘willing slave of hope’, Josephus offers plenty polemics calling these false prophets that are ‘cheats and false messengers of God.’ (*War* 6.287).

Many of the Sign Prophets appealed to the economically oppressed peasants of the time, such as “Jonathan, a vile person, and by trade a weaver, came thither and prevailed with no small number of the poorer sort to give ear to him;” (*War* 7.438). We see in the case of Jonathan (same as the Baptist) his followers were unarmed. As noted by Nathan C. Johnson:

In the groups discussed here, such salvation, as we shall see, never arrived, and Rome violently put down these gatherings. In light of this iron-fisted response, the question arises whether or not these movements had violent intentions. Though a handful of sign-prophet gatherings were armed, these movements were not all violent per se, and Josephus even notes that some of the slain throngs were “unarmed”²⁹.

Christopher Rowland shows the relationship between the inspiration and motivation of these signs’ prophets and the fantasies of the scriptures:

²⁸ HENGEL, *Zealots*, 229.

²⁹ JOHNSON, “Early Jewish Sign Prophets”.

Whatever the social and economic circumstances which led to the genesis of those traditions, the biblical material was itself a factor in the emergence of attitudes. Its presence as a catalyst was one which could, and did, lead to dangerous and subversive attitudes (e.g., *War* 7.254-255). Resentment would have been there, but it is hard to see that resentment being channelled into such revolutionary attitudes without the contribution made by the Scriptures themselves. The traditions about the glorious future which God had prepared for the people was itself, therefore, a cause of disaffection. Once the contrast between social and political realities stood in the sharpest possible contrast to the glorious future promised in the Scriptures and echoed in writings of the period, the situation probably led to disillusionment, a narrowing of religious vision or the conviction that change was needed. That hopes were entertained not merely as articles of faith but also as part of a programme of action is confirmed by the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the War Scroll from Qumran (1 QM) we find there the belief that the might of God's enemies would be overthrown in a battle in which the angelic legions would come to the aid of the sons of light. The fantastic detail of the preparations outlined in the War Scroll gives some indication of the frame of mind of some groups as they entertained hopes of participating in an armed struggle against the enemies of Israel (cf. *War* 5.459; 388)³⁰.

3. Jesus and the Sign Prophets

Richard Horsley has stated

For just at the time of Herod and Jesus, several significant movements emerged among the Judean and Galilean people that were headed by figures acclaimed by their followers as kings or by figures who promised to re-enact the deliverance of Israel from foreign rule in Egypt³¹.

Many of these figures were Sign Prophets. John J. Collins sees similarities of the sign prophets to Jesus. In the

Gospels, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, to shouts of Hosanna to the Son of David. For the biblically illiterate, Matthew 21:4-5 supplies the quotation from Zechariah 9:9, even providing Jesus with two animals rather than one, missing the Hebraic parallelism. It is certainly tempting to understand this incident in light of the sign prophets in Josephus³¹.

Rebecca Gray has seen the following common attributes to all the sign prophets:

³⁰ ROWLAND, *Christian Origins*, 17

³¹ COLLINS "Millenarianism in Ancient Judaism". Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/ancient-judaism.

1. The sign prophets were all leaders of sizable movements.
2. The movements they led were popular movements; that is, their followers were drawn mostly from the common people.
3. These figures presented themselves as prophets. In some cases, at least, they appear to have modeled their behavior on certain prophetic figures from the ancient past.
4. These prophets are all reported to have led their followers from one place to another. In several accounts, their destination is described simply as the wilderness or desert; in some cases, specific sites are mentioned, including the Jordan River, Mount Gerizim, Mount of Olives or the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.
5. The sign prophets announced to their followers that God himself was about to act in a dramatic way to deliver them. We shall see that it is in most cases extremely difficult to determine precisely how they envisaged this deliverance or what they thought its consequences should be³².
6. I have changed point 6 by Gray using a better nuance that would not describe these actions as miracles as Gray did, but re-enactments. These re-enactments were the great eschatological signs promised by these prophets. In connection with their announcement of imminent divine deliverance, these prophets would re-enact some dramatic scriptorial event, From the particular terminology that Josephus uses to describe their action these figures have acquired the name “Sign Prophets”.

As we examine an earlier form of the TF, many of the attributes Rebecca Gray describes above are applicable. In order to do a comparison, I will do an evidenced reconstruction of the TF. This is an updated model of Allen’s that does away with the probable added commentary that the Jesus movement exists to this day³³. That looks like a gloss when you see all the other Sign Prophet passages. Here is the Model Reconstruction of *Ant.* 18.63-64:

And there is about this time a certain man, a sophist and agitator. A teacher of men who revered him with pleasure. [whatever was excised from the TF it was probably some eschatological sign similar to other sign prophets] Many of the Judaeans, and also many of the Galilean element, he led to himself in a tumult; he was believed to be a King: Many were roused, thinking that

³² GRAY, *Prophetic Figures*, 113.

³³ ALLEN, “Model Reconstruction”, 142.

thereby the tribe could free themselves from Roman hands. [Josephus may have mentioned Jesus as a pseudo prophet here but it has been replaced with the Emmaus passage found in Luke] And, when on the accusation of the first men among us Pilate condemned him to be crucified. Many of his followers, the Galileans and Judaeans were slain and destroyed.

For the first point Jesus led two groups to himself before he got executed (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.63). [This is actually in the *textus receptus* as it stands]. Also, of note Bermejo-Rubio did not see Jesus as being crucified alone³⁴. For point 2 these were the common people, a realistic reconstruction made by Allen has Judeans and Galileans as it is unlikely Jesus led Jews and Greeks, both of whom were at each other's throats in the lead up to the war³⁵. Christian tampering goes out of his way to stress Jesus as a prophet, probably triggered by what Josephus originally wrote of Jesus being a false prophet. On the rest of the points Jesus probably led his followers to Jerusalem promising divine help from a vision he had. Evidence of the linguistics of the earlier form of the TF also favour the Sign Prophet hypotheses. One word that is attested in the variants is the word *tis* ('certain'). In Codex A of Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.11.7 quotes the TF and has *tis* after *Iēsous* referring to 'a certain Jesus.' This *tis* is the same reading as the Slavonic. 'The Slavonic Josephus offers a trace of the same pronoun: the phrase *muzi nekij* retroverted into Greek would correspond to *anēr tis* (certain man)³⁶. While this word *tis* made no difference to Christian scribes who use it for heroes or villains, it just so happens that Josephus often used this descriptive to say somebody was unimportant. A certain so and so. It was probably common knowledge in Justin Martyr's time that Josephus did in fact use *tis*. Justin Martyr can imagine how Trypho would caricature Jesus, writing *Iēsous tinos* (Dial. Trypho 108). Josephus used this descriptive for many of the Sign Prophets and messianic figures to show they were unimportant to the Jewish people and for propaganda reasons to show the Romans many were nothing but troublemakers. He had another 'certain Jesus son of Saphot' as head of a band of robbers. (*War* 3.450). This certain Jesus had a triumphant entry into Tiberias on up to fifty Roman horses (*War* 3.452). This phrase *tis* was also used for Judas the Galilean (*War* 2.118), Theudas (*Ant.* 20.97) and the unnamed prophet under Festus (*Ant.* 20.188). The original TF would also have described Jesus as a 'certain man'. The Slavonic

³⁴ BERMEJO-RUBIO, "(Why) Was Jesus the Galilean Crucified Alone?", 127-154.

³⁵ ALLEN, "Model Reconstruction", 133.

³⁶ BERMEJO-RUBIO, "Hypothetical Vorlage", 358; PAGET, "Some Observations", 565; EISLER, *The Messiah Jesus*, 38-41.

preserved the notion that Jesus was not named in the original TF. Of course, Jesus not being named is not unusual for Josephus: cases such as the Egyptian (*War* 2.261–263; *Ant.* 20.169–172) who led a revolt of thousands and he was featured in both *Antiquities* and *War* yet Josephus could only call him the ‘Egyptian’. Same goes for the ‘Samaritan’ who was also not named and was described as “A man who made light of mendacity”. In that passage his mob ‘appeared in arms’! (*Ant.* 18.85-87). Compare this to the Slavonic passage on the Baptist: “And at that time a certain man was going about Judaea³⁷”. The Slavonic preserves that John is not named in the Baptist passage in Josephus, the Slavonic used a pre-Eusebian tampered passage as there is no reason to drop the name John other than using a source manuscript that did not have John named. The Baptist was referred to as a “certain man”. This is more likely the original pinned by Josephus. The same happened with an earlier form of TF, Jesus is not named and referred to as a ‘certain man.’ This is in line with how Josephus described the Sign Prophets.

From Ken Olsens scholarship there is evidence of Eusebius interpolating the phrase ‘doer of wonderous works’ (*paradoksōn ergōn poiētēs*)³⁸ but this could have been to cover a Josephan phrase about Jesus showing an eschatological sign. Eusebius could have easily picked out the word *paradoksōn* (of-wonderous) that is also used in Luke (Lk. 5:26). The Emmaus passage from Luke looks like it was used to cover over any expression Josephus may have described Jesus as a false prophet. Instead, a Christian scribe was using Luke for this phrase – ‘the divine prophets having said both these things and myriads of other wonders concerning him.’ Goldberg’s study shows that the Emmaus narrative in Luke resembles the TF and even proposes one of the options “that they might signify that an inventive Christian forger of the *Testimonium* was influenced by the Gospel of Luke”³⁹

We can determine from all the passages Josephus has on the Sign Prophets how he viewed Jesus:

Now, we know what he [Josephus] thought of those who harboured or encouraged messianic pretensions, namely, that they were nothing but a band of fanatics who broke riots and the seeds of war. In fact, Josephus went so far as to affirm (in *War* 6.313) that the Messianic oracles contained in the prophetic books of Israel referred to Emperor Vespasian⁴⁰.

³⁷ LEEMING H. – LEEMING K. (eds.), *The Slavonic Version*, 248.

³⁸ OLSON, “A Eusebian reading”, 103.

³⁹ GOLDBERG, “The Coincidences of the Emmaus”, 59-77; Quote from GOLDBERG, “Josephus’s Paraphrase Style”, 2.

⁴⁰ BERMEJO-RUBIO, “Una crítica de la propuesta de John P. Meier”, 273.

4. So, what do the gospels say?

Jesus' original eschatological sign was probably excised from the TF. Josephus would have given a reason for Jesus' execution, even in a "writer as sloppy as Josephus, one would expect at least a hint of why some leading Jews delated Jesus to Pontius Pilate"⁴¹.

If Jesus' sign had been the destruction of the temple, that would never have been excised from the TF as it would have been in line with the gospels. The particular sign of Temple destruction would only be appropriated to Jesus *ex eventu*. Jesus' original sign would have been in the same vein as Theudas or the Egyptian, whatever action Jesus promised, his sign (i.e. a re-enactment of some scriptural divine intervention that Jesus would have got himself from a vision) would have been to start the new age. As Jesus' original sign would have ultimately failed, when the temple actually got destroyed this was thrown onto Jesus as the failed prophecy as the gospels suggest. (It was only a failed prophecy in Jesus' own day but not an ultimately failed prophecy in the readers day – let the reader understand!) As a literary device the gospels show that they were uncomfortable with a failed prophecy of Temple destruction (Mark 13:1-31)⁴². When the Temple actually got destroyed in 70CE Mark included it in his gospel, but with the qualifier that it was a false report (Mark 14:57-58) to counteract why it didn't happen in Jesus' day.

All the sign prophets failed in their endeavours, a promised supernatural intervention failed to materialise, so it is only natural that the gospels would try to explain all this away. Jesus would offer no sign to this generation. (Mk. 8:11-12). "Jesus' contemporaries ... want some sort of proof he is the messiah", others recognised Jesus should have performed signs but Jesus would not perform for his adversaries. The later Synoptics parallels project the sign of Jonah to this saying, a confirmation from the Tanakh made by the later evangelists that Jesus was resurrected (Mt. 12:39; 16:4; Lk. 11:29)⁴³. They dissociate Jesus from other sign prophets (Mt. 24:11, 24-26; cf. Mk. 13:22). Yet many memories of Jesus being a prophet reoccur in the gospels. Jesus thought himself a prophet (Mt. 13:57), others thought him a prophet (Mt. 16:14, Jn 7:40, 4:19, Lk. 24:10-21) even those Jesus healed recognised him as a prophet (Jn. 9:17), even crowds proclaimed it (Mt. 21:11). Jesus' enemies also recognized him as a prophet (Mk. 14:65). According to the gospels Jesus making the claim of the Temple being destroyed and re-

⁴¹ MURPHY-O'CONNOR, *Paul A critical Life*, 75.

⁴² SANDERS, *Jesus and Judaism*, 61-76.

⁴³ LEVINE – BRETTLE, *The Bible with and Without Jesus*, 317-319 [317].

stored, may have been a peshet (commentary finding meanings in the scriptures for today's events), on the first Temple destruction in Daniel 9:26 or Jeremiah 7. And to rebuild the Temple may have been taken from Tobit 14:5. This was the new the great sign now appropriated to Jesus. Just like the other sign prophets Jesus was able to lead a crowd to re-enact a biblical event and be part of an eschatological moment in time. This is exactly the type of claim the many sign prophets as reported by Josephus made. Hengel noticed in the Rabbinic literature centuries later that we have disapproving rabbis of the sign prophets who were trying to force the end⁴⁴. R. Helbo is reported of saying "They should not force the end; when they come up from exile, they should not come home in huge mobs; they should not revolt against the empire; and they should not reveal their mysteries."⁴⁵ R. Zeira reports, "That [those who know] should not reveal the end of days; and that they should not distance the end of days [by saying that it is still distant]"⁴⁶". Peter Schäfer main thesis in his book, *Jesus in the Talmud* shows that most mentions of Yeshu were about different figures at different times but these same figures were used as sophisticated counternarratives to the gospels and could have preserved an understanding of Jesus by the Jews⁴⁷. In one of those counternarratives Simon J Joseph noticed that the Babylonian Talmud (Sanh. 43a), Yeshu was "one who leads the people astray"⁴⁸ That Yeshu was accused of sorcery and Josephus often described the Sign prophets as *goētos* ("charlatan/magician"). Barnett says that Josephus' description of the Sign Prophets invokes a contrast to the Exodus-conquest prophets:

Josephus' description of Theudas and other Sign Prophets as 'charlatans', [*goēs tis* ("certain magician")] (*Ant.* 20.97), [*goētes kai apateōnes* ("imposters and deceivers")] (*Ant.* 20.167) [*pseudoprophētēs* ("pseudo prophet")] (*War* 2.261), [*goētos* ("charlatan")] (*Ant.* 20.188) must be read against the background of the historian's [Josephus'] own description of the Exodus and the *goēteia* ("witchcraft") and *mageia* ("magic") of the Egyptian Court magicians (*Ant.* 2.286 cf. 2.302, 332, 336). Likewise, the self-designation of Theudas and the Egyptian as "prophet" and the reference to the unnamed prophet of A.D. 70 as false prophet (*pseudoprophētēs*) must be understood in relationship with Josephus' presentation of Moses and Joshua as the true prophet(s) of the Exodus⁴⁹.

⁴⁴ HENGEL, *Zealots*, 124.

⁴⁵ TOWNSEND translation *Song of Songs* 2:7.

⁴⁶ STEINSALTZ, *Koren Talmud Bavli, Ketubot* 111a.

⁴⁷ SCHÄFER, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 8-10.

⁴⁸ JOSEPH, *Jesus and the Temple*, 21.

⁴⁹ BARNETT, "Jewish Sign Prophets", 681.

Prophecies of Temple destruction were circulating, we know of at least two Jesus' that are attributed the prophecy, Jesus Christ and Jesus ben Ananias. Before we discuss these two figures let's reproduce a passage by Josephus showing this prophecy circulating without an awareness of exactly whom the prophecy came from:

For there was a certain ancient oracle of those men, that the city should then be taken and the sanctuary burnt, by right of war, when a sedition should invade the Jews, and their own hand should pollute the temple of God. Now, while these zealots did not [quite] disbelieve these predictions, they made themselves the instruments of their accomplishment (*War* 4.388).

As Rebecca Gray noted, “Jeremiah predicted that Jerusalem would be captured and the temple destroyed, and his fixation on these predictions caused many to conclude that he was “out of his mind” *Ant.* 10.114) ... the similarities between his portrayal of Jesus [Ben Ananias] and his portrayal of Jeremiah suggest that Josephus thought that the two men were similarly inspired by God⁵⁰. The gospel of Mark claims Jesus' relatives exclaimed “He is out of his mind” (Mark 3:20-21), a midrash reflecting the evangelist seeing Jesus as a prophet.

Let's examine Jesus ben Ananias prophecy:

A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the holy house, a voice against the bridegrooms and the brides, and a voice against this whole people! This was his cry, as he went about by day and by night, in all the lanes of the city (*War* 6.301).

To Josephus this prophecy became memorable and interesting in the aftermath of the Temple destruction. It would have been another worthless prophecy made by a madman (not worth reporting or writing about) if the Temple hadn't been destroyed. The same is happening to the gospel of Mark. A prophecy appropriated to Jesus, made Jesus more interesting as a remembered figure over other remembered Sign Prophets.

Mark has a literary construct of Jesus overturning the Merchants tables in the Temple. (Mark 11:15-19). This is an unlikely event, but works great as a piece of peshirim. It is the passages that Mark invokes is where the political commentary and historical data is contained. The gospels are not narrative history but rather peshirim just like what was used in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Let us now examine this passage in detail:

⁵⁰ GRAY, *Prophetic Figures*, 30.

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. When evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city (Mark 11:15-19).

The Tanakh allusions of this table overturning passage has eschatological implications and reflects the action of a typical Sign Prophet from this time. Mark is steeped very deep in reaction to Temple destruction of 70 CE.

To see what Mark is alluding to in the table overturning passage we will first examine Deuteronomy. Deut. 14:24-26 shows the workings of the Temple where most Jews would sell 10% of what they have for the pilgrim festivals. They would spend that money and eat it in the presence of the Lord. The Temple court would buy and sell sacrifices among other things⁵¹. Mark is alluding to Zechariah by having Jesus disrupting the workings of the Temple, "And on that day there will no longer be a Canaanite (or merchant) in the house of the Lord Almighty" (Zech. 14:21) Jesus disrupting the normal practices of the Jewish Temple in getting rid of the merchants is enacting Jewish eschatological expectations. As Paul's Fredrikson says of the whole passage:

In sum: Jesus' gesture [overturning tables in the Temple court] near the archetypal holiday of national liberation [Passover] in the context of his mission ("The Kingdom of God is at hand!") would have been readily understood by any Jew watching as a statement that the Temple was about to be destroyed [by God, not human armies, and certainly not literally or personally by Jesus himself], and accordingly that the present order was about to cede to the Kingdom of God⁵².

Next we will examine the phrase: "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations?' But you have made it 'a den of robbers'". Amy Jill Levine examines the allusion to Isaiah 56:6-8 where at the end of the world, foreigners and Jewish diaspora will join with the Jewish to offer sacrifices to Yahweh⁵³. The Temple will become a house of prayer for all nations, an eschatological image by Isaiah. This is joined with the

⁵¹ SANDERS, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*, 46-69.

⁵² FREDRIKSEN, *From Jesus to Christ*, 113.

⁵³ LEVINE, *The Misunderstood Jew*, 151-155.

phrase ‘den of thieves’ which is taken from Jeremiah 7:8-11. The passage in Jeremiah about those doing abominations coming back to the Temple thinking they are absolved to those abominations are likened to these collaborating priests. So, Jesus’s depicted action in the Temple was expecting gods intervention at the end of the present world. All this table overturning scene is within a Markan sandwich about the fig tree. The fig tree and the temple are bound in the narrative in such a way as one could be seen as a metaphor for the other. This Markan sandwich being based on Hosea 9. The fig tree represents the Jewish temple cult, and its withering represents what God allowed to happen to it, and why (as a result of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE.) The gospel of Mark is right on the mark showing Jesus’ actions in Jerusalem was supposed to be an initiation of an eschatological event, just like the other Sign Prophets. Barker in his dissertation has examined the role the Temple has played as a pivotal point in eschatology reflected in second temple literature⁵⁴.

It was not only the charisma of the Sign Prophet but also the incredulity of the crowd of followers that caused the phenomenon of the number of Sign Prophets that popped up in this time period. The hope the sign prophet offered under dire conditions was a relief to the suffering peasants. In the words of Martin Hengel:

It is also important not to overlook the social reason underlying their struggle and their hopes. The economic conditions of the country had been thrown into disorder by Herod’s maladministration and the position had been made worse by famines. The situation had been interpreted as an expression of the eschatological distress and what was expected of the time of salvation to come was a reordering of property ownership which was in accordance with the original will of God at the time of the taking possession of the land.⁵⁵

The Kingdom of God as promised never arrived and the New Testament had to deal with that, in the words of Sanders:

There, [in Thessalonians] we learn, Paul’s converts were shaken by the fact that some members of the congregation had died; they expected the Lord to return while they were all still alive. Paul assured them that the (few) dead Christians would be raised so that they could participate in the coming kingdom [Thess. 4:16–18; cf. 1 Cor. 15:12-19] ... The history of these adjustments to the view that God would do something dramatic while Jesus’ contemporaries were still alive is fairly easy to reconstruct. Jesus originally said that the Son of Man would come in the immediate future, while his hearers were alive. After his death and resurrection, his followers preached that he would

⁵⁴ BARKER, “The Eschatological Role of the Jerusalem Temple”, 1-409.

⁵⁵ HENGEL, *Zealots*, 312.

return immediately – that is, they simply interpreted “the Son of Man” as referring to Jesus himself. Then, when people started dying, they said that some would still be alive. When almost the entire first generation was dead, they maintained that one disciple would still be alive. Then he died, and it became necessary to claim that Jesus had not actually promised even this one disciple that he would live to see the great day. By the time we reach one of the latest books of the New Testament, II Peter, the return of the Lord has been postponed even further [2 Peter 3:3-8].⁵⁶

Conclusion

The messianic figures, including Sign Prophets acquired a bad name in the aftermath of the Roman Jewish War and were given the blame for the troubles brought on Judea. This is a pronouncement of Josephus and is also seen from the “footsteps of the messiah” passage in *Mishnah Soter* 9.5. The apocalyptic aspect typical of Sign Prophets started to be disassociated with Jesus and this can be seen as the *Testimonium Flavianum* was overwritten. The writings of an early church father, Papias, were not preserved as he was a millenarian, perhaps closer to the original Jesus movement (Eusebius *EH* 3.39.12). This in turn earned Papias the polemic from Eusebius who described Papias “to have been of very limited understanding” (*EH* 3.39.13). Jesus being a millenarian prophet started to be disassociated away from him. Jesus like other Sign Prophets expected a cataclysmic event to unfold. He was a product of his time, an apocalyptic prophet of second Temple Judaism. To realize people actually thought the Sign Prophet could pull it off, be it Jesus, the Egyptian of Theudas – the crowd did not just think what the sign prophet promised was possible – they actually thought it would happen. This is the reason they could pull a crowd and hope to achieve an impossible task. Some of these movements were armed, some were not, so whether the groups of people Jesus led before his execution (*Ant.* 18.63) were armed or not, his movement can be seen in light of sign prophet movements.

Jesus like other Sign Prophets attempted to force the end and initiate the new age. The worldview of the common people of first century Judea, Samaria and Galilee literally believed the promised re-enactment of scripture by the Sign Prophet would happen. That God would intervene, that walls would come tumbling down, waters would part or some other such sign. This would initiate God’s power struggle as represented by the Sign

⁵⁶ SANDERS, *Historical Jesus*, 179-180.

Prophet in eschatological hope. The group that followed Jesus expected supernatural intervention, they gathered because they really thought God would intervene. Harsh conditions of the peasants made them yearn and believe in the better times promised in the imminent kingdom of God promised. In their apocalyptic view a reversal of fortunes would happen in political power shift initiated by the sign prophet. A prophet would be regarded as a rebel by outsiders and this as is seen in later anti Christian polemic (Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 29; Lactantius, *Inst.* 5.3) Celsus also seems to be under the impression ‘that in the days of Jesus others who were Jews rebelled against the Jewish state and became His followers’ (*Cels.* 3.7). The line between rebel and sign prophet is so thin that Josephus had to make a distinction, in that what they did was “not so impure in their actions (*War* 2.258). This comparative study sees Jesus as just one of a series of Sign Prophets that were reported in Josephus works.

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[recibido: 20/06/23 – aceptado: 15/09/23]