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This is the “accepted manuscript” published in E. Pfoh and L. Niesiolowski-Spano, eds. *Biblical Narratives, Archaeology, and Historicity: Essays in Honour of Thomas L. Thompson*, (London: Bloomsbury/T & T Clark, 2020), pp. 119-137.
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IS JOSEPHUS'S JOHN THE BAPTIST PASSAGE A CHRONOLOGICALLY DISLOCATED STORY OF THE DEATH OF HYRCANUS II?*

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On the one hand John the Baptist plays a central role in the Gospels. On the other hand, neither rabbinic tradition nor, with one exception, ancient historians seem to know anything of a first-century CE John the Baptist. The exception is Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*, produced in Rome in the early 90s CE. John the Baptist appears in a passage at *Ant.* 18.117-119, situated by Josephus in a context dated 35 CE, a few years after many scholars understand Jesus to have been crucified.

This article proposes that Josephus's 'John the Baptist' passage in *Antiquities* is a chronologically displaced story of the death of Hyrcanus II, the aged former high priest, by Herod the Great in either c. 34 or 30 BCE.

As a matter of method the Gospels are set completely to one side and the focus is solely on analysis of the Josephus passage.

* Dedicated to Thomas L. Thompson, mentor, friend, teacher with conscience and courage. I remember his first written comment on a paper of mine. I had written: 'It could be argued that...' Thompson in the margin: 'Please do'. Another Thompson aphorism: 'When everyone is agreed on something, it is probably wrong'. In other words, as Thompson has also put it, 'in our fields, if all are in agreement, it signifies that no one is trying to falsify the theory: an essential step in any scientific argument'. I thought of what I have come to call Thompson's Rule when I encountered this scientific study showing that, as counterintuitive as it sounds, unanimous agreement actually does reduce confidence of correctness in conclusions in a wide variety of disciplines (Gunn et al. 2016).

The passage in *Antiquities* is in Josephus's language and style, yet at the same time the passage reads as an insertion into pre-existing text, like an ancient excursus or footnote set into a text that would read perfectly smoothly without it (Schwartz 2013: 106-9). This description does not mean the passage is an interpolation by a later Christian scribe. For a number of reasons the passage is unlikely to have come from a later Christian forger, not the least of which is that Josephus's John the Baptist is not in any way portrayed as Christian.¹ Rather, the insertion of a story into preexisting narrative is a well-known phenomenon in the composition process of Josephus.² But this composition process results in precisely the kind of passage that can be subject to Josephus making a chronological mistake, in this case attaching an undated story from a source to the wrong Herod. Here is the Josephus John the Baptist passage:³

But to some of the Jews it seemed that the army of Herod was destroyed by God—indeed, God quite justly punishing [Herod] to avenge what he had done to John, who was surnamed the Baptist.

For Herod killed him, although he was a good man and [simply] bade the Jews to join in baptism, provided that they were cultivating virtue and practicing justice toward one another and piety toward God. For [only] thus, in John's opinion, would the baptism [he administered] indeed be acceptable [to God], namely, if they used it to obtain not pardon for some sins but rather the cleansing of their bodies, inasmuch as [it was taken for granted that] their souls had already been purified by justice.

¹ On the forgery issue see the discussion of Kirby (2015). A recent argument for forgery (Nir 2012) identifies the ideology of Josephus's John the Baptist passage as that of 1QS and considers Qumran texts not part of mainstream Judaism, in contrast to the Essenes considered to have been part of mainstream Judaism and unrelated to the Qumran texts. Nir argues that Josephus could not have favorably portrayed a view that purification would be effective only if moral sin was eliminated first, which Nir argues was held only by fringe groups on the edges of Judaism such as represented in the Qumran texts; therefore, Nir argues, the John the Baptist passage is a forgery and interpolation. However each of these assumptions—that the Qumran texts were fringe, that 1QS and the Essenes are unrelated and that Josephus could not have represented the purification teaching of 1QS favorably—is doubtful.

² As just one example, compare Noam (2018: 59-69), on an interpolation by Josephus at *Ant.* 13.282-283 of a story from a Jewish source concerning a heavenly voice in the temple heard by John Hyrcanus I, into a narrative otherwise following *War*. Noam discusses the way in which the story was 'interpolated into an existing narrative in *Antiquities*...a further illustration of Josephus's addition of sources with parallels in rabbinic sources to his later work [*Antiquities*]' (p. 69).

³ Translation of John Meier, with Meier's explanatory comments in brackets (Meier 1992: 233). Other translations from Josephus in this article are from Loeb Classical Library editions (LCL).

And when the others [namely, ordinary Jews] gathered together [around John]—for their excitement reached fever pitch as they listened to [his] words—Herod began to fear that John's powerful ability to persuade people might lead to some sort of revolt, for they seemed likely to do whatever he counseled. So [Herod] decided to do away with John by a preemptive strike, before he sparked a revolt. Herod considered this a much better [course of action] than to wait until the situation changed and [then] to regret [his delay] when he was engulfed in a crisis.

And so, because of Herod's suspicion, John was sent in chains to Machaerus, the mountain fortress previously mentioned; there he was killed. But the Jews were of the opinion that the army was destroyed to avenge John, God wishing to inflict harm on Herod. (*Ant.* 18.116-119)

In this passage John is said to have been a righteous man. To those who were practicing virtue and piety (which it is implied John teaches), John instructed them βαπτισμῷ συνιέναι, to be 'joined' in immersing. But when 'others' (τῶν ἄλλων)—presumably not under religious discipline—also heard John, 'their excitement reached fever pitch as they listened to [his] words'. When Herod, the ruler, saw that the people 'seemed likely to do whatever [John] counseled', Herod 'began to fear that John's powerful ability to persuade people might lead to some sort of revolt'. Herod therefore arrested John in 'a preemptive strike' and sent John as a prisoner to Machaerus (a fortress across from Qumran on the other side of the Dead Sea). There, at Machaerus, Herod had John executed. The method of execution is not stated. Following that Herod's army was destroyed, which many Jews believed was divine punishment for what Herod had done to John. As part of the insertion Josephus added the cross-reference to the mention of Machaerus.

This, then, is Josephus's story of John. In this story there is no mention of Galilee, asceticism or wilderness associated with John. There is no criticism by John of Herod's marital behavior. There is no mention of strange dress or diet. Herod is presumed ruler over the area in which John is active, and Herod controls Machaerus. John is portrayed favorably, unlike Josephus's negative portrayals of wilderness wonder-workers of the first century CE. Josephus uses a word widely in use meaning immersion, βαπτισμός, not the word used in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament as a *terminus technicus* for Christian baptism, βάπτισμα.

On the baptism of John in the Josephus passage, key points of interpretation and/or assumptions (without going into detail to argue each of these points) are: (1) The immersions are repeated, not one-time, and are best understood in terms of a study of Étienne Nodet (2009), of initiation to social levels of formal status and purity requirements as reflected in Josephus's

description of Essene practices of *War* 2.129, 137-139, 150, and the *haburim* of rabbinic tradition.⁴ There is an initiatory, legal-witnessing component to first-time purification upon entry but there is also continuing purification following entry to that social circle. (2) The immersions accomplish purification in Jewish terms, not removal of sin. (3) The procedure is uncertain but may have been immersions done by oneself with or without witnesses assisting, indistinguishable from Jewish purification in the stepped-pool *mikvehs* found archaeologically in large numbers. (4) John's ideology of purification, in which purification is to be done only by those already in a prerequisite state of moral sinlessness accomplished through right behavior for the purification to be acceptable to God, is exactly that of 1QS 3.6-12 and 1QS 5.13-14 of the Qumran *yachad* texts. It is not Pharisaic/rabbinic (purification is for all without precondition and unrelated to sin) or Christian (one time initiatory, removes sin). (5) John's instruction that observant Jews 'be united (with one another)' in practicing purification suggests social organization; compare access to communal food and drink of the Qumran *Serekh* texts for which purification by immersion is a prerequisite for participation. (6) Josephus or his source may be criticizing Christian baptism, but it is also possible that Josephus, writing to gentiles, or his source is simply clarifying a common misunderstanding held by gentiles concerning Jewish purification. (7) The surname, 'the Baptist', 'the Immerser' (Ἰωάννου τοῦ ἐπιβαλουμένου βαπτιστοῦ), carries no necessary connotation that John was immersing other persons; the surname could come about because he was known for being an immerser or bather, or a teacher of such or leader of a disciplinary order practicing such. (8) It is not John's purification-immersion teaching which prompts Herod's murderous response, but rather John's popularity among the public who are swayed by his words or public sermons—the implication is John is an alternative locus of popular authority raising the specter of insurrection—which is the issue to Herod.

The point of interest here is that every word of Josephus's story of John would read perfectly well in the time of Herod the Great (37-4 BCE). The figure 'Herod' of the story, if the story were read in isolation, would read perfectly well and naturally as Herod the Great.

Meanwhile, Hyrcanus II, the aged ex-high priest executed by Herod the Great, has long been presumed and understood to have been named 'John' on the basis of papponymy—the common Jewish practice of naming a firstborn

⁴ Cf. *War* 2.150 speaking of the Essenes: 'They are divided, according to the duration of their discipline, into four grades; and so far are the junior members inferior to the seniors, that a senior if but touched by a junior, must take a bath, as after contact with an alien' (also: Klawans 2000: 145-74; Sanders 1990: 37-8; and Haber and Reinhartz 2008: 93-124).

son after the paternal grandfather (on the prevalence of papponymy, Hachlili 2005: 195). The paternal grandfather of Hyrcanus II was John Hyrcanus I (high priest 135-104 BCE).

The name 'John' for Hyrcanus II has not, however, gone unchallenged. In a 1987 article Tal Ilan noted that there is no ancient attestation of a Hebrew name for Hyrcanus II, questioned whether Hyrcanus II had a Hebrew name, and if he did, challenged the assumption that it must have been 'John' (Ilan 1987). Yet while it is true there is no confirmed attestation of a Hebrew name for Hyrcanus II, it seems unwarranted to suppose he did not have one. If it were not for coins, it would not be known that the final Hasmonean king, Antigonus, had a Hebrew name, Mattathias. Hyrcanus II minted no coins according to the most current information.⁵ This means that Hyrcanus II's Hebrew name cannot be discovered by means of coins, yet just as Antigonus had a Hebrew name (known only from coins), so it can be presumed Hyrcanus II (who had no coins) did as well, given that other Hasmonean rulers certainly did and there is no evidence or reason to suppose any did not.

As for the identity of Hyrcanus II's Hebrew name, Ilan cites the example of Jonathan Aristobulus III (*War* 1.438; *Ant.* 15.51) whose Hebrew name was that of his great-grandfather Alexander Jannaeus (Jonathan), which suggests that papponymy while common may not have been absolute. Nevertheless, although not attested or certain, Yohanan or John is the leading candidate for Hyrcanus II's Hebrew name based on papponymy, the same name as Josephus's John the Baptist. In the end Ilan's argument is more of a demonstration of incompleteness of evidence in favor of, than a falsification of, the prevalence of papponymy as it bears on Hyrcanus II's Hebrew name.

Hyrcanus II had a long history as high priest of the Jewish people, 76-67 and 63-40 BCE, ending in 40 BCE when he was overthrown, cast out of his native land and taken prisoner to the Parthian empire. According to Josephus the Jewish diaspora east of the Euphrates, at least after the new Parthian ruler

⁵ It has been conclusively ruled out that any of the 'John high priest' Hasmonean coins can be attributed to Hyrcanus II (Hendin 1991: 6). It has also separately nearly been ruled out that any of the 'Jonathan high priest' Hasmonean coins can be attributed to Hyrcanus II (Hendin and Shachar 2008). Nor are any other coins attributed to Hyrcanus II. A reasonable explanation for why Hyrcanus II minted no coins is that, except for c. 67 BCE when he was king for only a few months according to Josephus—too brief to mint coins—Hyrcanus II held no civil authority other than as ethnarch and therefore was in no position to mint coins (see Sharon 2017).

Phraates IV set Hyrcanus II free and honored him, considered Hyrcanus II their legitimate high priest and king, even though he was in exile.⁶

Hyrcanus II as Ethnarch (or, John the Authority on Purification)

According to a study of Nadav Sharon, Hyrcanus II was recognized as *ethnarch* of Jews throughout the Roman empire by Julius Caesar in 47 BCE; the term ‘ethnarch’ meant ruler of a people in a territory, not ruler of the territory; and, as ethnarch Hyrcanus II had formal authority under Roman law over affairs of the Jewish people of the diaspora as well as in Judea (Sharon 2017: 126-9, 260-80, 357-9).⁷

Julius Caesar honored Hyrcanus II in this way after commending Hyrcanus II for providing military support to Julius Caesar in Egypt and for bravery. Julius Caesar promised Hyrcanus II and his descendants the ethnarchy of Jews empire-wide and the high priesthood in Jerusalem in perpetuity, as part of a restoration of ancestral law and *de facto* self-rule to the Jews following Roman conquest, in keeping with Julius Caesar’s practice with other peoples who had been conquered by the Romans.⁸ In other words, Hyrcanus II, ‘high

⁶ *Ant.* 15.14-15: ‘When Hyrcanus was brought there, the Parthian king Phraates treated him very leniently because he had learned of his distinguished and noble lineage. For this reason he released him from his bonds and permitted him to settle in Babylon, where there was a great number of Jews. These men honored Hyrcanus as their high priest and king, as did all of the Jewish nation occupying the region as far as the Euphrates.’

⁷ In Sharon’s analysis Hyrcanus II’s ethnarchy starting in 47 BCE related to the Jews as a people throughout the Roman empire, and there is no evidence Hyrcanus II held civil authority over all people in any geographical area in the period of Roman rule. If Sharon is correct it would not be expected that Hyrcanus II would have minted coins, thus removing the mystery of the missing Hyrcanus II coins.

⁸ That the restoration of rights to practice ancestral customs and a return of *de facto* self-rule to the Jews under the ethnarchy of Hyrcanus II in 47 BCE was in keeping with the practice of Julius Caesar with other conquered peoples is discussed in Pucci Ben Zeev (1995). Julius Caesar’s designation of Hyrcanus II as authoritative in matters of *halakheic* law is illustrated at *Ant.* 14.192-195, described as a letter from Julius Caesar to the magistrates of Sidon: ‘Whereas the Jew Hyrcanus, son of Alexander, both now and in the past, in time of peace as well as in war, has shown loyalty and zeal toward our state, as many commanders have testified on his behalf, and in the recent Alexandrian war came to our aid with fifteen hundred soldiers, and being sent by me to Mithridates, surpassed in bravery all those in the ranks, for these reasons it is my wish that Hyrcanus, son of Alexander, and his children, shall be ethnarchs of the Jews and shall hold the office of high priesthood of the Jews for all time in accordance with their national customs... And if, during this period, any question shall

priest of the Most High God' (*Ant.* 14.163), was legally recognized as lawgiver or law-decider for the Jewish people throughout the Roman empire.

Although Hyrcanus II would have been ethnarch of the Jews formally only within the territory of the Roman empire, he may also have been regarded informally as authoritative by diaspora Jews outside the Roman empire in light of his status within the Roman empire. In this light Hyrcanus II's high standing in the diaspora after his exile in 40 BCE may have continued the status or authority he held before that time, rather than representing something new. Sharon (2017: 279 n. 87) notes that Hyrcanus II's authority over Jews living outside Judea seemed to be 'mainly in issues that have to do with religion—"manner of life" (*Ant.* 14.195).'

Following the downfall of the Antigonus Mattathias regime in Jerusalem (40-37 BCE), Hyrcanus II returned to Judea about 36 BCE, after which he may have divided his time between Jerusalem and Jericho. Despite the likelihood that Hyrcanus II remained until his death the single most respected and esteemed religious authority to Jews throughout the ancient world, never again would Hyrcanus II officiate as high priest in the temple in Jerusalem.

Hyrcanus II's Death and a Destruction of an Army of Herod

According to Josephus (*Ant.* 15.165-179), Herod—seeing the legitimacy with which the returned Hyrcanus II was popularly regarded as a threat in contrast to Herod's own much more questionable legitimacy to rule—treacherously executed Hyrcanus II on a legal pretext in 30 BCE in the context of an unsuccessful attempted flight of Hyrcanus II to take refuge with the Nabatean king Malichus I (reigned 59–30 BCE). Josephus situates Herod's execution of Hyrcanus II as occurring later than a destruction of an army of Herod in 32 BCE—the only destruction of an army of a Herod found in Josephus other than the one of Antipas of 36 CE (*Ant.* 18.114-115). According to Josephus, Herod invaded Nabatean territory but Herod's army was nearly annihilated at Canatha deep in Coele-Syria, in 32 BCE.

[Herod's forces] suffered great losses...the Arabs...returned and killed them after their rout. The Jews therefore suffered death in various forms, and only a few of those who escaped found shelter in their camp. Then King Herod in despair of the outcome of the battle rode off to

arise concerning the Jews' manner of life, it is my pleasure that the decision shall rest with them.'

get aid but in spite of his haste he was not quick enough in bringing help, and the Jews' camp was taken...so unexpected a victory...in destroying a large part of [Herod's] force. (*Ant.* 15.112-120)

However, the failed escape attempt and execution of Hyrcanus II is arguably better situated c. 34 BCE, preceding rather than following the First Nabatean War of 32-31 BCE which Herod ultimately won, reflecting a larger issue of systematic three-year offset errors in Josephus's datings of some events in the reign of Herod which have long been noticed. As discussed by Thomas Corbishley (1935: 22-4) and others since:

Every one who has gone into the subject at all is aware that there are obvious blunders in the chronology of Josephus [for the time of Herod]...all the existing discrepancies [in the time of Herod] can be found on the supposition that Josephus, in compiling his history, has failed to notice that, whilst in general his sources used the 'official' method of dating [from the start of Herod's reign in 37 BCE], some document or documents used a different scheme—regarding the year 40/39 B.C. as the first year of the reign...Thus, having described the events of 40-34 B.C. with considerable fullness, Josephus passes (*Ant.* 15.108) to the events of the seventh year, sc. 31/30 B.C., without apparently noticing that he has jumped three years...

Corbishley (1935: 24-5) noted similar unusual gaps of three years in Josephus's history-telling in two other places: from 20 BCE to 17/16 BCE, and 12/11 BCE to 9/8 BCE. *Antiquities* 15.380 has the rebuilding of the Temple begun in the eighteenth year of Herod whereas *War* 1.401 has the Temple rebuilding begun in the fifteenth year of Herod; Corbishley reconstructed both as referring to 23/22 BCE reflecting the two methods of dating. At *Ant.* 16.136 the building of Caesarea takes ten years, whereas *Ant.* 15.341 has twelve years; Corbishley suggested the ten may have been the accurate number and the twelve mistakenly calculated by Josephus based on the two methods of reckoning.

A further example (not brought out by Corbishley): at Antioch in 37/36 BCE and at Alexandria in 34 BCE, in public ceremonies, Mark Antony, ruler of the eastern Roman Empire, gave title to territories comprising nearly the whole of the Eastern Roman Empire to a restored Egyptian Ptolemaic dynasty of kings and queens. According to historian Hendrikus van Wijlick (2013: 135-48), the Donations of Antioch of 37/36 BCE to Cleopatra VII, consort of Mark Antony, included Coele-Syria, parts of Nabatea and the 'balsam-producing parts of Judaea' (Plutarch), which Josephus identifies as within 'the

region about Jericho' (*Ant.* 15.96). These territories were given to Cleopatra 'towards the end of 37 or at some point in 36' (van Wijlick 2013: 142). Cleopatra allowed Herod to lease back her Judean territory starting in 36 BCE according to both Dio Cassius and Plutarch. However Josephus in both *War* and *Antiquities* places the lease-back from Cleopatra in 34 BCE, with Josephus's date being erroneous in van Wijlick's opinion. Similarly, Plutarch and Dio have Lysanias, ruler of Iturea, executed by Mark Antony at Cleopatra's instigation in 36 BCE, but Josephus (*Ant.* 15.92) has Lysanias's execution in 34 BCE.

With this in mind, in the present case Herod's army was destroyed by the Nabateans with help from the forces of a general of Cleopatra in 32 BCE. A year later Herod (with a new army) was victorious over the Nabateans in 31 BCE. After that is when Josephus situates in *Antiquities* Hyrcanus II's attempt to flee to the Nabateans which failed and ended in Hyrcanus's execution. Josephus has Hyrcanus II (concerning whom Josephus has been completely silent in his history for four years prior to this point) trying to flee to the Nabateans for sanctuary—with the Nabatean ruler's active assistance including promises to send a force (*δυναμιν*, military power) to bring Hyrcanus's party safely to Nabatea—*after* the Nabateans, according to Josephus, had been defeated and had acclaimed Herod 'ruler (or, protector) of their nation' (*Ant.* 15.160, 172).

Hyrcanus's intended flight to the Nabateans and execution by Herod arguably makes better sense dated c. 34 BCE in the context surrounding Herod's trip to Mark Antony in Laodicea—*before* rather than *after* Herod's defeat by and then victory over Malichus I in the First Nabatean War of 32-31 BCE.

In 35 BCE Herod murdered the new, popular, eighteen-year old high priest Jonathan Aristobulus III, grandson of Hyrcanus II. (At least the family members believed Herod had had the young man murdered, according to Josephus; Herod claimed it was an unfortunate accident in a swimming pool.) A year earlier Herod had written to Mark Antony that Jonathan was so well-liked that the whole land could very easily be filled with disorder and war 'because the Jews had formed hopes of an overturn of the government and the rule of another king' (*Ant.* 15.30). According to Josephus, Herod feared that Hyrcanus II's daughter Alexandra, Jonathan's mother, 'would try to overthrow his government if she found an opportunity' (*Ant.* 15.42).

[Herod] called a council of his friends and bitterly accused Alexandra of having secretly plotted against his throne, saying that through Cleopatra she was working to get Antony to deprive him of his power and have the youth [Jonathan Aristobulus III] take over the government in his place (*Ant.* 15.31-32)

After a complaint from the aggrieved mother, Alexandra, to Cleopatra, following the death of her son, Herod was summoned by Mark Antony to Laodicea in 34 BCE to answer for the death of Jonathan Aristobulus III. The complaint from Alexandra seems to have been part of more far-reaching moves and hopes for Herod's removal by Mark Antony and a restoration of the Hasmoneans to power at that time, whether by means of Hyrcanus II himself or by having a Hasmonean woman as queen.

According to Josephus these moves included the governor of Idumea and trusted general of Herod, Costabarus, conspiring with Cleopatra to align with her and no longer be subject to Herod (*Ant.* 15.255-257; cf. 15.79); Alexandra scheming to have Mark Antony become sexually enamored with her beautiful daughter Mariamne (even though Mariamne was currently inconveniently married to Herod) and by this means 'they might recover the throne' (*Ant.* 15.73; cf. 15.23-28); and an escape attempt by Alexandra and Mariamne from Herod's house arrest to a Roman military unit (*Ant.* 15.72), all in what Josephus portrays as a climate of popular hostility to Herod and support for a Hasmonean restoration. The alleged conspiracy of Hyrcanus II with Nabatean king Malichus I would be well understood as one more element in this context. According to *War* 7.300 Herod's building restorations at Masada c. 34 BCE were part of this context as well:

Herod finished this fortress as a refuge for himself, suspecting a twofold danger: peril on the one hand from the Jewish people lest they should depose him and restore their former dynasty to power; the greater and more serious from Cleopatra, queen of Egypt. For she never concealed her intention, but was constantly importuning Antony, urging him to slay Herod, and praying him to confer on her the throne of Judea.

But alas for these hopes, the meeting with Mark Antony in 34 BCE went well for Herod. Herod came out of the meeting having 'strengthened Antony's goodwill toward [Herod's] throne and his government' (*Ant.* 15.75). Either shortly before or shortly after Herod's journey to Mark Antony in 34 BCE makes the best sense for the attempted flight of Hyrcanus II to the Nabateans and then failure of that attempt and Hyrcanus II's execution.

This date actually agrees with the picture given by Josephus in the earlier *War*. At *War* 1.433-434 Josephus tells of Herod's execution of Hyrcanus II without dating it. But then Josephus mentions that Mariamne, on the eve of Herod's trip to Mark Antony of 34 BCE, 'openly upbraided him [Herod] with the fate of her grandfather Hyrcanus and her brother Jonathan' (*War* 1.437,

439-444), thus situating Herod's execution of Hyrcanus II as having already occurred by that point, in agreement with the reconstruction argued here. In *Antiquities*, which has redated Hyrcanus II's execution later, note that until Josephus's story of Hyrcanus II's execution at the time of Herod's trip to Octavian in Rhodes of 30 BCE, Josephus mentions only daughter Alexandra and granddaughter Mariamne, never Hyrcanus, following 34 BCE. At *Ant.* 15.72-73, 80, it is only Alexandra and 'the women' attempting to flee to the safety of Roman forces in 34 BCE, with no mention of Hyrcanus II. Arguably, Josephus when writing *Antiquities* did not know exactly when Hyrcanus II was executed and mistakenly dated Hyrcanus II's execution three or four years late.

Themes of Hyrcanus II and John the Baptist in Josephus Compared

The themes in Josephus's John the Baptist story of Herod fearing revolt, and preemptively executing, agree extremely well with the portrayal of Herod the Great of Josephus. Herod the Great's executions of rivals and threats to his rule, his paranoia and suspicions, are a major theme in Josephus in a way that is not paralleled at all in Josephus for Herod Antipas, with the sole exception of the John the Baptist passage at issue of *Ant.* 18.116-119. That passage (*Ant.* 18.116-119) reads as if it were other language for Josephus's descriptions surrounding Hyrcanus II in the time of Herod the Great.

Fearing that everyone would incline to Aristobulus [grandson of Hyrcanus II], [Herod] put him to death at Jericho... (*Ant.* 20.248)

Herod began to fear that John's powerful ability to persuade people might lead to some sort of revolt...decided to do away with John...Machaerus...there he was killed. (Ant. 18.118-119)

[Herod] believed...it would be safest not to have a man who was far worthier than himself of obtaining the kingship wait to seize his opportunity...[he] ordered the man [Hyrcanus II] to be strangled. (*Ant.* 15.164, 176)

[Herod] decided to do away with John by a preemptive strike, before he sparked a revolt. Herod considered this a much better course of action than to wait until the situation changed and then to regret his delay. (Ant. 18.118)

Herod married Aristobulus' sister Mariamme, hoping to capture the goodwill of the people for himself, thanks to their recollection of Hyrcanus [II]... (*Ant.* 20.248)

[John] was a good man... And when the others (ordinary Jews) gathered together around John... they seemed likely to do whatever he counseled... (Ant. 18.117-118)

Josephus's John the Baptist story emphasizes condemnation by the Jews at large for Herod's unjust execution of John. Here is Josephus stating a similar belief held by Jews concerning Herod's perfidy and Hyrcanus II's innocence in the matter of Herod's execution of Hyrcanus II.

And as proof that it was without committing any crime that [Hyrcanus II] came to such an end they specify his mildness of character and the fact that not even in his youth did he give any sign of boldness or recklessness... [the] charges were a pretext invented by Herod... what was most painful of all, as we have said before, was that in his old age [Hyrcanus II] came to an unworthy end... That Antipater and Herod advanced so far was due to his mildness, and what he experienced at their hands in the end was neither just nor an act of piety. (*Ant.* 15.165-182)

For Herod killed him, although he was a good man and simply bade the Jews to join in purification, provided that they were... practicing justice toward one another and piety toward God. (Ant. 18.117)

Josephus's story of the execution of John the Baptist corresponds with his story of Herod's execution of Mariamne, Hyrcanus II's granddaughter, both featuring a popular belief that divine punishment fell on Herod as a result.

[T]here arose a pestilential disease which destroyed the greater part of the people and also the most honored of [Herod's] friends, and this caused all to suspect that their misfortune had been brought upon them by God in His anger at what had lawlessly been done to Mariamme. (*Ant.* 15.243)

But the Jews were of the opinion that the army [of Herod] was destroyed to avenge John, God wishing to inflict harm on Herod. (Ant. 18.119)

But is it plausible that Josephus would make a chronological mistake of the magnitude suggested in the case of the John the Immerser passage—of attaching an undated story from a source to the wrong Herod, over a half century removed in time?

The answer is yes it is plausible; the phenomenon has a number of parallels.

Of Doublets and Chronological Dislocations

At *Ant.* 14.145-148 Josephus mistakenly wrote a Roman Senate decree from 139 BCE as applying to Hyrcanus II in 47 BCE. At *Ant.* 14.150-155 Josephus mistakenly wrote a decree of Athens from 105 BCE as applying to Hyrcanus II of 47 BCE (Eilers 2008). Following these two examples Josephus then sets forth a further dossier of Caesarian documents (*Ant.* 14.190-264), which Josephus presents as all applicable to Hyrcanus II. However some of those documents apply to John Hyrcanus I of the preceding century, not Hyrcanus II. As Claude Eilers (2003: 194) commenting on these errors of Josephus put it succinctly: 'Unfortunately, he had the wrong Hyrcanus'. Wrong Hyrcanus, wrong Herod, same principle.

Daniel Schwartz has done work on doublets in Josephus from sources in which, just as in biblical texts, variant versions of the same figure or event are narrated in the text as if they are two persons or two events. For example Josephus separately presents two accounts of a visit of the Roman governor of Syria, Vitellius, to Jerusalem at the time of a Jewish festival, which have usually been assumed in scholarly discourse, based on Josephus's portrayal, to be distinct historical visits (*Ant.* 18.89-122). Schwartz argues convincingly that the two visits of Josephus are two versions of a single visit of Vitellius and Herod Antipas to Jerusalem at Passover 37 CE (Schwartz 2013: 100-104; cf. also Nodet 2014: 274-6).

Similar analysis has been done by David Goodblatt on what Josephus presents as two unrelated sets of events in Parthian Babylonia following successively in chronological sequence, commonly dated c. 20-35 CE and 41 CE (*Ant.* 18.310-379). Goodblatt (1987) showed that these are stories of the same context told different ways, with the correct datings being 36-52 CE (rule of Asinaios and Anilaioi in Nehardea) and 40/41 CE (pogrom in Seleucia) respectively.

The study of Corbishley (1935) referred to above showed a doublet concerning Herod's second trip to Rome of 12 BCE at *Ant.* 13.66-270. As Josephus has it a series of events of 14-12 BCE is essentially repeated in 12-10 BCE. Josephus misunderstood two versions of the same events of 14-12 BCE

as being different and consecutive in sequence and mistakenly situated the second version of the same events in the following two years of 12-10 BCE.⁹

A Judas son of Sepphoraes, ‘unrivaled interpreter of the ancestral laws...educated the youth...’, inspired an anti-Roman insurrection in Jerusalem c. 4 BCE at a time of a removal of Joazar from the high priesthood (*Ant.* 17.149, 207-208, 339). A Judas of Gamala, characterized by Josephus as the founder of the Fourth Philosophy dedicated to liberty from Rome, is said to have inspired another anti-Roman insurrection at a time of removal of the same Joazar from the high priesthood again in 6 CE (*Ant.* 18.3-4, 23-26). Some scholars have held that this is too much coincidence and reflects a doublet; if so, one of the variants is chronologically dislocated in Josephus by about nine years (Lagrange 1911; Rhoads 2011).

In the same way, Josephus’s John the Baptist story reads as a doublet or different version of Hyrcanus II chronologically dislocated to the time of the wrong Herod. In this case Josephus did not place the two versions of the death of Hyrcanus II close together in the same time setting as in some of the other cases of doublets. If Josephus had done that, the doublet in this case would have been recognized before now. Instead, Josephus mistakenly attached one of the traditions of the death of Hyrcanus II to the wrong Herod, just as he separately mistakenly attached documents to the wrong Hyrcanus.

Summary of Comparisons between Josephus’s John the Baptist and Hyrcanus II

1. *Same name*: Hyrc. II: Though unverified, ‘John’ is suggested from papponymy.
2. *Judea sphere of activity*: likely.
3. *Popular support*: Hyrc. II: *Ant.* 15:15; 20.248.
4. *Herod fears threat to power*: Hyrc. II: *Ant.* 15.178, 183.
5. *Righteous man considered innocent*: Hyrc. II: *Ant.* 15.174-178.
6. *Executed by Herod*: Hyrc. II: *Ant.* 15.174-178.

⁹ Corbishley (1935: 30): ‘The narrative of the quarrels in Herod’s family as given in 13.66-135, taken by itself, is coherent, although incomplete... On the other hand, the story of what Josephus calls the δευτέρᾳ ἔρις in Herod’s family, as given in 13.189-270, is merely another version, from a different angle, of the former quarrel, and its dislocation must be due to the fact that it was attributed in the sources to the “twenty-seventh” and “twenty-eighth” years of the reign; and since Josephus knew that Herod had gone to Rome in the “twenty-sixth” year (on his own dating) he naturally presumed that this was a fresh quarrel, not another story of the earlier quarrel dated on a different system.’

7. *Site of imprisonment/execution*: Josephus's John the Baptist: Machaerus on the Judean/Nabatean border across from the Dead Sea. Hyrc. II: unstated, but occurs when seeking refuge with the Nabatean king who planned to send horsemen to escort Hyrcanus II's party from the Dead Sea and 'bring them in safety' to Nabatea (*Ant.* 15.167-173).
8. *Herod condemned by Jews for the execution*: Hyrc. II: *Ant.* 15.174, 182.
9. *Execution is followed by a destruction of Herod's army*: Hyrc. II: *Ant.* 15.118-119 (with death of Hyrc. II in Josephus's *Antiquities* redated c. four years earlier, per argument).
10. *Purification by immersion*: Hyrc. II: purification by immersion central to his practice as first-century BCE high priest and ex-high priest. As ethnarch of Jews of the diaspora would have been the principal figure known in the diaspora associated with purification by immersion.
11. *Purification ideology and communal organization like that of 1QS*: Hyrc. II: both when he was high priest, and later as high priest emeritus spending much of his time at the Royal Estate of Jericho, it would be highly unusual if Hyrcanus II did *not* have a familiar relationship with the site of Qumran and its purification installations in physical proximity to Jericho.

Every element of the Josephus John the Baptist passage agrees with, or can agree with, Hyrcanus II in relation to Herod the Great. On the one hand there are these positive circumstantial indicators, cumulative in impact. On the other hand there is no detail in Josephus's John the Baptist passage in contradiction to Hyrcanus II, apart from the single factor of the chronological setting in which the story is found in Josephus. But that chronological setting is neither internal to the story nor necessary to the story. It was an ancient judgment of the historian, Josephus, known for fallibility elsewhere on chronological matters.

Therefore the thesis should be considered.

Emic and Etic

Little is known of Hyrcanus II's activity after his return to Judea c. 36 BCE. Josephus represents Hyrcanus II as esteemed by 'all of the Jewish nation' east of the Euphrates as their legitimate high priest and king (*Ant.* 15.14-15). If after his return to Judea in c. 36 BCE Hyrcanus II lived in the residences of previous Hasmoneans and now of Herod, at whose invitation he had returned, he would have spent much of his time at the royal estate in Jericho, at a time of peak

activity of the scrolls later found to have been placed in caves at the nearby site of Qumran.

In agreement with the point of view of some of the Qumran texts with respect to the power center in Jerusalem, Hyrcanus II had been estranged from a regime in control of Jerusalem which had driven him from Judea. An adversary had seized the high priesthood by force. The usurper regime had held power in Jerusalem before succumbing to a Roman invasion. The usurper had died violently at the hands of the Romans, in his death evoking the imagery of the fate of a 'Wicked Priest' in 1Q Pesher Habakkuk. When Hyrcanus II, instead of being restored to power and honor after his return to Judea in accord with Herod's promises, was killed by Herod and every male of Hyrcanus II's lineage killed too (*Ant.* 15.266), did that have anything to do with the end of all compositions of Qumran texts which occurred at that time, for reasons no one knows?¹⁰

Hyrcanus II and Baptizing

Josephus says nothing of Hyrcanus II baptizing. Josephus also does not mention that Hyrcanus II engaged in mystical rites of ascension to heaven, issued *halakhic* rulings, was involved in calendric decisions, officiated in temple administration, wrote or had issued in his name hymns and liturgies, or corresponded with Jewish officials abroad and at home. Yet it is likely that Hyrcanus II engaged in all of these things, because he was high priest for thirty-two years and those are the kinds of things a high priest is believed to have done. To this list can be added purification by immersion. The immersions of Josephus's John the Baptist are nothing other than purification immersions, in running water or in the full-body-immersion *mikvehs*, which have been abundantly attested archaeologically in Judea and Galilee starting from about the beginning of the first century BCE.¹¹ If an identity of Josephus's John the

¹⁰ Atkinson and Magness 2010: 340: '[T]he Essenes apparently stopped composing new religious texts after the middle of the first century B.C.E., as there are no historical references in the scrolls [of Qumran] to events after 31 B.C.E.'; Wise 2003: 84: '[J]udging by the latest references [in an inventory of thirty-one historical allusions in Qumran texts], all of the sectarian writings on the list were probably composed between 60 and 30 B.C.E.'

¹¹ Arguing for a slightly later date than the c. 100 BCE date most commonly judged for the start of *mikvehs* used for ritual immersions, Berlin 2005: 452, 469 n. 148: '*mikva'ot* first appear in contexts of the early-mid first century B.C.E.; there is no evidence for such installations in Jewish settlements before then...there is no positive evidence for so early a date [late second century BCE] from any of these locales [Jericho, Upper City of Jerusalem,

Baptist with Hyrcanus II is contested on the grounds that there is no ancient testimony that Hyrcanus II baptized (immersed for purification), that reflects an underlying presupposition that Josephus's John's immersions differed from the purification practices of most Jews in first-century BCE Judea. Such assumptions can arise from anachronistically reading into Josephus Christian conceptions of what Josephus's John the Baptist's immersions must have been.

Josephus does not discuss Jewish purification practices much anywhere in his works, perhaps because his attention was on political history. Josephus obtained most of his information for Hyrcanus II from Herod's court historian Nicolaus of Damascus and other sources concerned with political history. That Josephus did not make a point of stating that Hyrcanus II, who as high priest was the leading Jewish figure in the world involved with purification for over three decades, immersed himself for purification, is not a significant omission.

But the question nevertheless remains in a different form: if purification by immersion was not noteworthy for Hyrcanus II, why was it noteworthy in the case of John the Baptist? A curious finding has been that the *mikvehs* used by Jews for ritual immersions, so pervasive in Judea and areas under the control of the Hasmonean state in the first century BCE, seem not to have been found at all in the diaspora.¹² Would Hyrcanus II in Babylon, given the means and opportunity to do so, have resumed purification by immersion as had been his practice in Judea?

According to Josephus the Parthian ruler, Phraates IV, when he came to power in 38/37 BCE, 'released [Hyrcanus II] from his bonds and permitted him to settle in Babylon, where there was a large number of Jews' (*Ant.* 15.14). Did Hyrcanus II, perhaps now in a house of his own, have *mikvehs* installed? In first-century BCE Judea purification by immersion would not be noteworthy. But in the diaspora, in Babylon, a Jewish practice of purification by immersion in *mikvehs*, especially by Hyrcanus II, a public figure, would have been unusual and noteworthy. Although hypothetical, this is one way Hyrcanus II could have become known as 'the Immerser', with the name following him in certain circles back to Judea.

Qumran, Gezer, Gamla]... Michael Wise has recently proposed that the Teacher of Righteousness...should be dated to the mid-first rather than the mid-second century B.C.E. If correct, then it is interesting to note that this is the same period in which the more widespread but less rigorous practices of "household Judaism" appear.'

¹² E.g. Haber and Reinhartz 2008: 164 n. 13, 174: 'As of yet, there have been no *mikvaot* found in the Diaspora (...) The archaeological evidence suggests that ritual ablutions were associated with synagogues in the Diaspora and that these purification procedures did not involve immersion in a *mikveh*.'

Conclusion and Implications

This article has proposed that Josephus's John the Baptist is an independent tradition of Hyrcanus II of the time of Herod the Great, which has been chronologically displaced in *Antiquities*. Josephus's John the Baptist story is to be understood as in the class of additional material from Jewish stories inserted by Josephus into the preexisting narrative of *War* in the composition process of *Antiquities*. These are the same kinds of stories that are found in later rabbinic traditions, although this particular story is not attested in later rabbinic compilations.

If this analysis is correct—that Josephus misplaced this story to the wrong Herod in *Antiquities*—then there is no attestation external to the New Testament of the Gospels' figure of John the Baptist of the 30s CE. The implication would seem to be this: either the Gospels' John the Baptist has been generated in the story world of the Gospels, or he derives from a different figure than Josephus's John the Baptist, secondarily conflated with Josephus's John the Baptist. These issues are beyond the scope of this paper.

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