

Josephus on John the Baptist

Flavius Josephus (a.d. 37–c.100) is the author of what has become for Christianity perhaps the most significant extra-biblical writings of the first century. His works are the principal source for the history of the Jews from the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (b.c. 175–163) to the fall of Masada in a.d. 73, and therefore, are of incomparable value for determining the setting of late inter-testamental and New Testament times.

Antiquities of the Jews 18.115–119

Chapter 5

Herod the Tetrarch Makes War with Aretas, the King of Arabia, and is Beaten by Him; As Also Concerning the Death of John the Baptist. How Vitellius Went Up to Jerusalem; Together with Some Account of Agrippa, and of the Posterity of Herod the Great

2. (116) Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist; (117) for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. (118) Now, when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it should be too late. (119) Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure against him.