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(Stand: 3.3.2023)

Good Question...

...on two historical issues in Acts: Theudas and the Sanhedrin

A dear friend of mine got a series of honest questions from a sincere seeker of Jewish background. He forwarded them to me for my input, and here is my response...

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Dear sir,

XXX forwarded this email on to me for my comments, so here they are...

[TankNote: I will put the ISBE in *italics*, JS remarks in **bold**, and my remarks in "regular".]

.....
But first, let me commend you on approaching this material carefully and critically (in a positive sense)! There are so few that think about the data they hear--I am always mindful of the passage in Acts praising the Berean synagogue (17.11) for actually checking Paul's references!

So, with that in mind, let's dive in...

In response to the gentleman's first question, XXX sent him the following entry from [ISBE](#):

THEUDAS. The leader of an unsuccessful rebellion in the area of Judea during the 1st cent. A.D. The only reference to the name in Scripture appears in Acts 5:36, where Gamaliel, in his testimony before the Sanhedrin, indicates that the rebellion associated with Theudas occurred before the uprising led by Judas the Galilean, who arose in the days of the census" (presumably a reference to the taxation associated with the governor Quirinius, Ca. A.D. 6; cf. Lk. 2:1f.). A more probable date, however, was provided by Josephus (Ant. xx.5. 1197-99)), who assigned the movement to the rule of the procurator Cuspius Fadus (A.D. 44-46) several years after the death of Gamaliel himself.

Josephus described Theudas as a self-proclaimed prophet who deluded the majority of the masses" (four hundred men according to Acts) with his promise to divide the Jordan River upon command so that the people could cross with ease, thus repeating the miracle performed by Joshua. The attack of a Roman cavalry

regiment soon brought an end to the uprising, however, and many in the movement were either slain or captured. Theudas himself was decapitated.

Some scholars (e.g., F. F. Bruce. Comm. on the Book Of Acts [[NICNT](#), 1954], pp. 124f.) have suggested that the accounts provided in Acts and Josephus refer to different individuals. But modern attempts to associate the Theudas of Acts with other historical rebels in Palestine, such as Simon (Herod the Great's former slave), Theudion (Herod the Great's brother-in-law), or Matthias (the son of Margaloth, a radical teacher of the law), have proven unconvincing. The name was relatively uncommon, and the significance attributed to the rebellion by the text of Acts certainly characterizes the movement as worthy of reference by Josephus. The disparity between the accounts of Acts and Josephus, with respect to both details and dating, would suggest instead some problem associated with the sources used by the authors. (C. N. Jefford)

XXX,

I'm still wondering about what Christians believe about this "Gamliel." If Theudas happened after Rabban Gamliel passed away, how could Rabban Gamliel mention Theudas?

Let me first make a comment about the ISBE. That encyclopedia suffers from a great unevenness in quality, actually demonstrable from the two entries you read! The first on "Theudas" is unduly skeptical; the one on "Gamaliel" is unduly speculative. I will go through your remarks in give what we know and what we DON'T know from the 'hard data'.

Now, as to Theudas...

All indications lead to the belief that Josephus and Gamaliel were NOT talking about the same "Theudas".

1. Josephus refers to a more "troublesome" figure than does Gamaliel (*Antiquities*, 20.5.1.97-98). Whereas Gamaliel ascribes only 400 men to T., Josephus uses the terms "a great part of the people" and "many" [The following paragraph in Josephus recounts a massacre of over 20,000 people, so a band of only 400 would probably not be 'newsworthy' enough for Josephus to even mention. Therefore the ISBE insistence that Josephus WOULD HAVE mentioned so 'significant' an event is unwarranted.].
2. The terminology for the figure is likewise somewhat different: Gamaliel says T. was 'claiming to be somebody', Josephus uses the terms 'magician' and 'prophet'.

3. Gamaliel says that T's followers 'rallied to him' (a more political sounding term); Josephus says T.'s followers took their effects and were migrating to the river Jordan.
4. Gamaliel says that T. was simply killed; Josephus says T was captured and then beheaded, and the head then taken to Jerusalem.
5. Gamaliel says that after T was killed, "all his followers dispersed", but Josephus says that many of the followers were killed by the Roman troop of horsemen, and that many of them were likewise captured and arrested.
6. (Additionally, it should be noted that the scholar Origen referred to a Theudas active before the birth of Jesus as well, in *Contra Celsum* 1.57, although it is possible that this is simply a referral to Acts already.)

At the surface, these events look like different occasions, even though the name 'Theudas' is the same. That this would not create a prima facie case for identity, can be seen from the following considerations:

1. Although 'Theudas' was not a common name itself, it does show up in Jerusalem ossuaries close in time, e.g. *Inscription 1255*).
2. 'Theudas' shows up in the Papyri as hypocoristic forms (i.e. "pet" names, 'nicknames') for many Greek theophoric names (e.g. Theodotus, Theodorus, Theodotion, etc.) [*New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, vol 4.183-185], so it could refer to any number of people at the time.
3. At the time there was a prevalence for having both a Greek AND a Hebrew name, with the Greek name having the same or very similar meaning as the Hebrew. This pattern shows up in the Jerusalem ossuaries and the 'Goliath' family in Jericho [e.g. 'Theodorus' (gk) for 'Nathanel' (hb)]. With this in mind, 'Theudas' could be Greek for a wide range of Hebrew names: Jonathan, Nathanael, Mattathias, Hananias, Jehohanan, etc. In one case, the synagogue ruler in Ophel was listed under his alternate Greek name "Theodotus".
4. We do know that there were many smaller tumults in Judea after the death of Herod the Great (Josephus uses the phrase "ten thousand" in *Antiquities*, 17.10.4.269-8.285!), and that we do not have data on many of them. The data seems to indicate that that the two that we know of led by a 'Theudas' are NOT the same event.

Therefore, the reference by Gamaliel to the minor exploits of a Theudas was not necessarily historically illegitimate or confused.