

The Birthday of King Agrippa— Between Josephus and Joseph

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Whether Jews in antiquity celebrated birthdays is a question that was recently discussed in two articles. Both of these articles argued that, given the lack of any clear evidence for the observance of this custom, the answer must be, “No.”

Israel Ta-Shma concluded in his 2002 article that “the custom of celebrating birthdays was not adopted among Israelites, and Hebrew sources from ancient times to the late middle ages do not preserve even a hint of its having acquired a ceremonial status as a celebration to mark the annual date of a person’s birth.”^[1]

Another scholar, Andreas Lehnardt, whose article appeared in the same year, approached the topic from a completely different perspective.^[2] He opined that the neglect of the subject of birthdays in research is surprising, “not only because *Geburtstag*^[3] celebrations were festive occasions that played an important role in the surrounding pagan culture, but also because the *Geburtstag* is mentioned in Jewish sources of the Greco-Roman period, in the New Testament, and in rabbinic literature much more frequently than in the Hebrew Bible.”^[4] Of course a comparison of these sources with the Hebrew Bible does not prove much, since it really has only one reference to a birthday celebration (Gen. 40:20).^[5] But if we set aside references to the date of a person’s birth rather than to the annual observance of a birthday, and if we also set aside references to birthday celebrations among Gentiles (especially birthdays of foreign rulers), very little remains in post-biblical sources either. As Lehnardt himself summarized: “In the sources we have studied there is no mention of the celebration of birthdays among Jews. Nor do we find a special status attributed to the annual event. Neither is any kind

of theological significance ascribed to birthdays at all.” Thus Lenhardt confirmed Ta-Shma’s conclusion and even broadened its application to all Jewish literature and not just Hebrew sources.

My brief remarks below pertain to a story told by Josephus, which is one of the few exceptions to the general rule of Jewish non-observance of birthdays. However, for reasons I will shortly explain, it appears that this story informs us less about the celebration of birthdays than it does about the important place of the biblical story of Joseph in Egypt in Josephus’ thought. It may also tell us something about the status this story enjoyed among other Jewish readers of the first century C.E.^[6]

The story to which I refer takes place in the time of Agrippa I, the king of Judea in the early 40s C.E. As part of his lengthy account of the life of this Jewish king, Josephus reports in *Ant.* 19:317-325 that on the occasion of his birthday banquet (γενέθλιον [*genethlion*]; *Ant.* 19:321) Agrippa remembered Silas, the former commander-in-chief of his army, whom he had banished because of his insensitive remarks. In keeping with the festiveness of the occasion, the king was inclined to take pity on Silas, so he sent for him to be brought back to the royal court. Such is the evidence that a Jew of the first century C.E. observed a birthday celebration.

Nevertheless, there are two reasons why one would be ill advised to draw firm conclusions about first-century Jewish birthday customs on the basis of this evidence. First, even if Agrippa did celebrate his birthday, we cannot extrapolate from his example to the conduct of other Jewish contemporaries, since he was (1) a king, who (2) was raised and educated in Rome where the custom of birthday celebrations was common.^[7] So even if we do not go so far as to deny his essential Jewishness, and accept him as “one of our brothers” (to use the language of the sages (m. Sot. 7:8; cf. Deut. 17:15 and *Ant.* 19:332), still it is clear that we cannot regard him as a typical Jew, whose behavior is indicative of the general practice. Second, it is possible that the story is mistaken, and despite the reference to the occasion as a “birthday,”

the cause for celebration was actually the anniversary of the king's ascension to the throne. This suspicion arises both from Josephus' testimony regarding King Herod, Agrippa's grandfather, who annually celebrated the anniversary of his royal ascension (*Ant.* 15:423), and also from the famous story in the Gospels concerning Herod's son, Antipas, the ruler of the Galilee who held a banquet in honor of his γενέσια (*genesia*; Matt. 14:6; Mark 6:21). While it is true that this Greek term could mean "birthday,"^[8] it is possible that it referred to the anniversary of a ruler's ascension.^[9] So it could be that Josephus was simply imprecise with his terminology with respect to Agrippa's celebration, and that what the Judean monarch really celebrated was not his birthday but the anniversary of his royal ascension, as was already the custom for Herodian rulers.

Even we set aside these objections and accept that this story does describe a Jewish birthday celebration, however, critical readers will still be reluctant to regard this testimony as historical, and prefer instead to view it as an example of Josephus' practice of incorporating motifs from the biblical story of Joseph in Egypt into his account of the life of Agrippa. For we must not overlook the fact that the sole reference to a birthday celebration in Scripture comes at a crucial point in the Joseph saga, when Pharaoh, in the course of celebrating his birthday, recalls his chief cupbearer and releases him from prison: *And on the third day it was Pharaoh's birthday, so he made a banquet for all his servants and he exalted the head of the chief cupbearer...and he restored the chief cupbearer to his duties* (Gen. 40:20-21).^[10]

Anyone who reads the story in *Antiquities* about Agrippa banishing Silas and then restores him to the royal court on his birthday and compares it with the biblical account just mentioned can hardly escape the suspicion that the similarity between the two is more than mere coincidence.

Indeed, anyone who reads Josephus' entire account of Agrippa's life will recognize the above example as just one among many points of contact with the story of Joseph. Here are some others:

1. According to *Ant.* 18:195-201 toward the end of Tiberius' reign Agrippa was imprisoned because he had voiced the hope that the aging emperor would soon die so that Gaius (Caligula) could reign in his place. While he was in prison it once happened that an owl alighted on the tree beneath which Agrippa was resting. On account of the special wisdom owls were believed to possess, a German prisoner interpreted this event as an omen that Agrippa would soon be released and go on to have a brilliant career. The prisoner requested that Agrippa remember him after his release and take steps to secure his liberty. The German prisoner warned, however, that if an owl ever appeared to him again it would mean that he would die within five days.^[11] There can be no doubt that the first part of this prediction, which Josephus put in the mouth of the German prisoner, was based on Joseph's interpretation of the chief cupbearer's dream (Gen. 40:14). Likewise, the second part of the prediction reflects Joseph's interpretation of the chief baker's dream (Gen. 40:17-19).
2. When Josephus reports that shortly thereafter Tiberius died and Gaius succeeded him as emperor, and that Gaius rewarded Agrippa by releasing him from prison, he not only mentions the fact of Agrippa's release, but also that the new emperor, after having sent for Agrippa, took the trouble to cut Agrippa's hair and change his clothes (*Ant.* 18:237). This is clearly an allusion to the story of Joseph's release from prison: *And they quickly removed him from the dungeon and he shaved and changed his robes and appeared before Pharaoh* (Gen. 41:14).
3. According to the continuation of the same paragraph (*Ant.* 18:237) Gaius then presented Agrippa with a gold chain in place of the iron chain with which he had been bound during the time of his imprisonment. It is hard not to believe that this chain, which is mentioned again in *Ant.* 19:294, was inspired by the gold necklace that Pharaoh presented to Joseph after he was released from prison (Gen. 41:32; cf. Ps. 105:18).

In light of these three parallels we may conclude that Josephus (or his source)^[12] compared Agrippa, who grew up in Rome and rose from the depths of a prison cell to the heights of royalty, to Joseph the son of Jacob, who pursued

a similar course. This explains why Josephus so frequently inserted motifs from the story of Joseph into his account of Agrippa's career, especially when describing Agrippa's advancement from a prisoner to a king.

The detail that Agrippa once celebrated his birthday fits so perfectly with this tendency to make allusions to the story of Joseph that its value as an historical witness to first century Jewish birthday celebrations is significantly diminished. On the other hand, it does have value, not only as an instructive example of why one must read the entire story before plucking a single detail out of it to use as historical data, but also as an indication of the high regard Josephus had for the story of Joseph. Such high regard, for which there are additional indicators,^[13] likely reflects the personal connection Josephus felt toward this biblical character not just on account of their shared names, but also because of their shared circumstances. For Josephus, too, had been in a dungeon (*Bel.* 3:341) but risen to an exalted place among foreign kings, and all this, as he believed no less than the biblical Joseph, by the power of divine providence.^[14]

Notes

[*] This article originally appeared in Hebrew as:

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המקרא ועולמו נה,א

["Agrippa's Birthday—From Joseph to Josephus," *Beit Mikra: Journal for the Study of the Bible and Its World* 55.1] (2010): 123-128.

[1] Israel M. Ta-Shma, "On Birthdays in Israel," *Zion* 67.1 (2002): 19-24 [in Hebrew].

[2] A. Lehnardt, "Der Geburtstag in den jüdischen Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit, im Neuen Testament und in der rabbinischen Literatur," in *Jüdische Schriften in ihrem antik-jüdischen und urchristlichen*

Kontext (ed. H. Lichtenberger and G. S. Oegema; Gütersloh, 2002), 402-428.

[3] I have used the term *Geburtstag* here and below because of its dual meanings (“day of birth,” a one-time event, and “birthday,” an annual celebration).

[4] See Lehnardt, “Der Geburtstag,” 402-403.

[5] In addition to Gen. 40:20 Lehnardt counts Hos. 7:5 (יִום מַלְכֵנוּ; “day of our king)—but it is possible that its meaning is not birthday but coronation day—and two verses that refer to the day of one’s birth and not to its commemoration in years after, namely Job 3:3 and Jer. 20:14 (and to these we might add Ezek. 16:4-5 [and also Eccl. 7:1—JNT]). See Lehnardt, “Der Geburtstag,” 402-403, esp. n 2.

[6] The question whether Josephus composed *Antiquities* solely for a Gentile audience or whether he also addressed it to Jews will not be discussed here. (The former opinion is espoused by S. Mason, “‘Should any wish to enquire further’ [Ant. 1.25]: The Aim and Audience of Josephus’ *Judean Antiquities/Life*,” in *Understanding Josephus: Seven Perspectives* (ed. S. Mason; Sheffield, 1998), 64-103. In any case, we cannot assume that Gentile readers were familiar with biblical stories. See Daniel R. Schwartz, 2 *Maccabees: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Jerusalem, 2005), 58 n. 2 [in Hebrew].

[7] K. Argetsinger, “Birthday Rituals: Friends and Patrons in Roman Poetry and Cult,” *Classical Antiquity* 11 (1992): 175-193. On Agrippa’s first thirty years in Rome, see Ant. 18:143-146; Daniel R. Schwartz, *Agrippa I: The Last King of Judea* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1990), 39-45,

[8] Cf., e.g., Lehnardt, “Der Geburtstag,” 410-412.

[9] See b. Avod. Zar. 10a: “What is the day of *genusia* (גְּנוּסִיָּא) of kings [m. Avod. Zar. 1:3; cf. t. Avod. Zar. 1:4—JNT]? Rabbi Yehudah said, ‘The day

when idolators exalt their kings.” See also Harold W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas: A Contemporary of Jesus Christ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 160-161 n. 5.

[10] For Josephus’ version of this biblical story, see *Ant.* 2:73 (and there, too, just as in the account of Agrippa, he used the term γενέθλιον).

[11] The second prediction was fulfilled at the end of Agrippa’s life. See *Ant.* 19:346.

[12] For the hypothesis that Josephus relied on a source, which I have designated the “Life of Agrippa,” see my *Agrippa I*, 31-38. To what is said there, it must be added that all three examples we have mentioned above pertain to the period of Agrippa’s imprisonment, where Silas, the main character in the story that mentions Agrippa’s birthday, used to visit him (*Ant.* 18:204).

[13] On Josephus’ treatment of this story, see M. Niehoff, *The Figure of Joseph in Post-Biblical Jewish Literature* (Leiden, 1992), 84-110; L. H. Feldman, *Josephus’ Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley, 1998), 335-373. Aside from the extensive treatment of this story in *Antiquities* 2, we have also to remember the allusions to this story elsewhere in the writings of Josephus, such as in the story of Joseph the son of Tobias and even in Josephus’ own autobiography. On these, see Dov Gera, “On the Credibility of the History of the Tobiads (Josephus, “Antiquities” 12, 156-222, 228-236),” in *Greece and Rome in Eretz Israel: Collected Essays* (ed. A. Kasher, et al; Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi and Israel Exploration Society, 1990), 21-38; Daniel R. Schwartz, *Flavius Josephus (Joseph ben Mattityahu): The Life of Joseph: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Jerusalem, 2005), 104 n. 242. In *Vit.* §204 Josephus toys with Gen. 45:28 (“My son Joseph is still alive and I will go and see him before I die”) and he makes a connection to the Joseph story in §208 when he describes his miraculous dream. The use of Gen. 41 in *Ant.* 17:345 belongs to this dossier.

[14] For Josephus' belief in divine providence, which was behind the important developments of his life, see *Vit.* §15, 83, 301, 425. This foundational belief is also underscored in his account of Agrippa (*Ant.* 18:127; 19:294, 347). On the importance of divine providence in the writings of Josephus, and especially in *Antiquities*, see H. A. Attridge, *The Interpretation of Biblical History in the Antiquitates Judaicae of Flavius Josephus* (Missoula, Montana, 1976).