Josephus and the New Testament

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Abstract

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New Testament


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Arguably, apart from the New Testament itself, Josephus has helped us understand the life and times and world of Jesus and the apostles as much as any other document of the ancient world. Unfortunately we have often strip-mined Josephus for selfish reasons and have left the message of this first-century Jewish historian in shambles. His relevance for Christianity has been flattened by a simplistic history=fact formula approach, and his contribution to our understanding of the ancient world has been twisted to suit modern needs and answer to questions Josephus never intended.

Acts is the only New Testament book which records how much time elapsed between Jesus' death and his ascension: "During the forty days after his crucifixion he appeared to the apostles from time to time" (1:3). The next key event after the ascension of Jesus into heaven was Pentecost (Acts 2:1). Pentecost is the Greek word for fiftieth and referred to Josephus, a Jewish historian alive at the time, gives us enough information so that we can locate the famine sometime between the years 46 and 48 (Antiquities XX, 5, 2). We also know from the Mishnah (Sotah vii, 8) that from the autumn of 47 to the autumn of 48 was a sabbatical year when the Jews let the land rest and harvested.