THE MOCKING OF BAR KOKHBA AND OF JESUS

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The Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 93b preserves a curious story of the mocking and execution of Bar Kokhba by a rabbinic gathering.

Bar Koziba (Son of a Lie) reigned three and a half years, and then said to the Rabbis, 'I am the Messiah נדננ ר2נ.' They answered, 'Of Messiah it is written that he smells and judges. Let us see whether he can do so.' When they saw that he was unable to judge by the scent, they slew him.

The ability to smell and judge was deduced from the word in Is 11:3:但仍ל usually translated 'and his delight', but taken by Rava to mean 'he will judge by the scent.'

This is a curious account, for three reasons. First, Bar Kokhba was killed by the Romans in the eighteenth year of Hadrian (= AD 134/135) in his last stand at a fortress near Jerusalem (Eusebius h.e. 4,6,3). There is no other account of his being put to death by Jewish judges or even by Jewish enemies taking the law into their own hands.

Secondly, there is no other account of a messianic pretender's saying, 'I am the Messiah', except perhaps in Mark 14:62, but there the longer text of Θ family 13 472 565 700 1071 1542 2542 Οrigen is likely to be correct: σῦ ηπαξ ὁτι έγώ έμμ. Further, there is no other account of Bar Kokhba's claiming to be the Messiah. Akiba said he was the Messiah (J'Taan. 68d), and the giving to him of the name Son of a Star was a claim by Akiba and others of his followers that he was the Messiah (Numb 24:17). They were playing on his real name עב. Eusebius tells that the rebel leader relied on his name in dealing haughtily with many of his fellow Jews 'as though indeed

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he was come from heaven to them as a light,' but Eusebius does not
say that he said in words, 'I am the Star from heaven'; on the con-
trary, Eusebius reports that he said it in deeds: ἐκ δὲ τῇ ἐποιησῷ... ὡς δὲ ἐξ οὐρανοῦ φωστήρ αὐτοῖς καταλαμβάνως... τεροτευμένος (Eusebius
h.e. 4,6,2).

Thirdly, the court did not execute the man it was trying until it had
tested his claim to judge by scent. It looks as though the claim, 'I am
the Messiah', was taken as a capital offence, and that the only thing
standing in the way of execution was checking whether or not God
had openly endorsed the claim that he was the Messiah by giving him
the power to judge by scent.

How would judging by scent be tested? Presumably the test would
consist of blindfolding the prisoner and then testing whether or not
he could smell the moral status of those who signalled their presence
to him; if a notorious sinner touched him, he would know he was
such, and if a righteous man touched him he would discern his right-
eousness.

We are reminded of the strange reference in Matt 26:67b, 68, Mark
they began to... cover his face and to strike him and to say to
him, Prophesy to us now, Christ; who is the one who has sported with
you?' (accepting the longer reading of the Washington Codex and
family 13, found also, with variants, in many other manuscripts). Note
that another tradition about servants who abused Jesus has been com-
bined, in various ways, with this judicial procedure (Matt 26:67a, Mark
14:65a,65c, Luke 22:63,65), and that a separate abuse scene is also
found in John 18:22-23.

I have argued that Jesus was convicted of blasphemy because he
was judged to have claimed to be the Messiah in so many words.
I do not think that the charge was true, but we have good evidence
in John 19:7 (and John 5:18) that the Jewish authorities, who decided
that he was guilty of a capital crime, based their decision on the
evidence that he made himself the Son of God, that is, that he claimed
in words to be the Messiah.²

² J.C. O’Neill, Who Did Jesus Think He Was? (Biblical Interpretation Series 11; Leiden:
Brill, 1995) 52-54; ibid., “Making himself equal with God” (John 5.17-18): The Alleged
30-61.