

Josephus and the Apocalypse

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In his history of the Jewish War, Josephus Flavius (36 – 100 AD), Jewish general, one of two directing the revolt against Rome in Galilee. After Vespasian captured him, he prophesied the latter would be emperor. When this proved true, the Romans honored him. Josephus mentions a prophecy that the ruler of the world would come from Judaea (a variant of the Messianic prophecy). Josephus made good use of this, as we shall now see.

By dint of his many talents, Josephus had already achieved prominence among his fellow Jews before he became a historian. When most decided to join the revolt against Rome in 66 AD, they chose him as a major general for Galilee.

After Vespasian and his son Titus arrived with their legions, these began conquering town after town. Josephus fled to his main headquarters, Yotfata (Jotapata), where he made a spirited defense. The Romans broke through, and he hid with some aristocrats in a cave beneath the town. The others, he tells us, wanted to commit suicide, rather than become slaves to the Romans. Josephus argued against this, but he could not prevail. They cast lots, with the idea that they would kill each other in order according to the numbers. "Yet was he [Josephus]," writes Josephus, "with another left to the last, whether we must say it happened so by chance, or whether by the providence of God" (The Wars of the Jews, translated by William Whiston [War III 8.7]. (In another version of this text, the Slavonic, he confesses to manipulating the lots.) Using his eloquence, Josephus persuaded his co-survivor to go with him and surrender to Vespasian.

On standing in the presence of the great Roman general, Josephus had a vision. When Vespasian declared he would send him to Nero, Josephus replied,

"Thou, O Vespasian, thinkest no more than that thou hast taken Josephus himself captive; but I come to thee as a messenger of greater tidings; for had not I been sent by God to thee, I knew what was the law of the Jews in this case and how it becomes generals to die. Dost thou send me to Nero? For why? Are Nero's successors till they come to thee still alive? Thou, O Vespasian, art Caesar and emperor, thou, and this thy son. Bind me now still faster, and keep me for thyself, for thou, O Caesar, are not only lord over me, but over the land and the sea, and all mankind; and certainly I deserve to be kept in closer custody than I now am in, in order to be punished, if I rashly affirm any thing of God." War, op. cit. III 8.9)

Vespasian did not send Josephus to Nero. He kept him "on the back burner." Two years later, after Nero's death and a series of short-lived successors, the vision proved true. Still in Judaea, the army proclaimed Vespasian to be Caesar. He and Titus honored Josephus as their prophet. They gave him Roman citizenship. They let him divorce his Jewish wife and marry a Roman. They granted him lands around Jerusalem. He sat in the villa of Titus, writing his Jewish War, including this passage:

But now, what did the most elevate them [the Jewish rebels] in undertaking this war, was an ambiguous oracle that was also found in their sacred writings, how, "about that time, one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth." The Jews took this prediction to belong to themselves in particular, and many of the wise men were thereby deceived in their determination. Now this oracle certainly denoted the government of Vespasian, who was appointed emperor in Judea (War, op. cit. VI 5.4).

("What did most elevate them in undertaking this war!" Only now, near the end of the book, does our historian mention the principal motive of the war, with a bow to Vespasian!)

With this background, we can understand why, throughout his vast works, Josephus avoids any reference to the apocalyptic eschatology of the Essenes or other groups (including, no doubt, the group on Masada in 73 AD). Nor does he mention it in connection with John the Baptist, to whom he devotes a paragraph in the Antiquities of the Jews (XVIII 5, 2). In his view, Vespasian was the fulfillment of prophecy. Josephus' life and livelihood depended on this. He did not want to suggest that other Jews might have other ideas. He certainly did not want to go into the details of their thinking about what the prophesied leader was expected to do.