

Moses the False Prophet in Tacitus' *Histories* 5

Tacitus prefaces his account of the sack of Jerusalem with a brief yet scathing ethnography of the Jewish people. This excursus is often dismissed as a simple ethnography compounded by rampant anti-Semitism, however, it is clear that Tacitus' goals are more nuanced. I argue that Tacitus portrays Moses as a false prophet and a charlatan, a swindler who feigns prophetic insight and divine power in order to gain influence and prosperity for himself.

Tacitus' Moses bears striking resemblance to charlatans such as Hermippus' Pythagoras and Lucian of Samosata's Alexander but his description remains distinctive from previous authors' — including Manthetho, Apollonius Molon and Lysimachus — in the way it emphasizes Moses' pseudo-divine rise to power and the avaricious laws with which he gains control of the naive and vulnerable Jews.

Furthermore, Tacitus' portrayal of Moses within the excursus reflects the central theme of the *Histories*, complementing his critique of Roman leaders and their attempts to re-found Rome after the demise of Nero and the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Like many of the imperial hopefuls in 69 CE, Tacitus' Moses is not a real founder. The destructive and self-serving laws and practices he lays down as the foundation of Judea cannot support a stable nation. Moses is no Romulus and he is certainly no Numa. To Tacitus, at best, he is a pretender, akin to the false Nero who was summarily executed on Cythnus.

In recounting the sack of Jerusalem, Tacitus uses his characterization of Moses as a foil for Titus and, by proxy, Vespasian whose divinely ordained accession was a theme central to the previous book. Vespasian's wonders in book 4 lay a divine foundation for the new empire that contrasts with Jerusalem's pseudo-divine, unstable foundation laid by Moses in book five (Luke:

77, 104). The sack of Jerusalem completes this contrast and establishes the Flavians as the rightful, divinely appointed new founders of Rome.

Bibliography

Luke, Trevor S. 2010. "A Healing Touch for Empire: Vespasian's Wonders in Domitianic Rome." *Greece and Rome*, 57 (01): 51-80.