

## Nothing New Under the Siege: Josephus' Revival of Expired Prophecy in *The Jewish War*

In book VI.193-219 of *The Jewish War* Josephus halts his description of the Roman siege of Jerusalem to describe the situation inside. Here he provides an account of a singular incident involving a Jewish mother who, compelled by the depredations of the revolutionaries, consumes her own child. Such an event, claims Josephus, is “unparalleled in the history whether of Greeks or barbarians, and as horrible to relate as it is incredible to hear” (trans. Thackeray). Yet Josephus' claim rings hollow. Such an event is prominently discussed twice in the Old Testament: first as a prophetic warning in Deuteronomy 28:48-62, and again as the fulfillment of prophecy in 2 Kings 6:24-31. Although these omissions are striking, Josephus' use of vocabulary shared with the LXX passages in question as well as the similar thematic elements to be found throughout suggest that here, as elsewhere, Josephus is renewing and even renovating expired prophecy within the context of his own times.

Josephus takes this opportunity to further his portrayal of the rebellion as a contest between the excesses of the zealots and the legitimacy of Rome through comparison with past divinely-ordained miseries. However, comparison with the biblical texts reveals significant differences. Deuteronomy 28 characterizes an unnamed, unsympathetic set of *ἐχθροί* as the agents through whom God will punish future disobedience, while 2 Kings 6 depicts the prophecy's fulfillment in a turn of events in which Elisha successfully entreats God to blind a force sent for his head by the king of Syria and seemingly sets their minds upon besieging Samaria (vv.11-20).

Noteworthy is the text's treatment of this force, still helpless after having regained their sight in the midst of Samaria: upon seeing the army the Israelite king Ahab questions Elisha, asking “Shall I not verily smite them, my father?”, to which Elisha replies, “Thou shalt not smite

them, unless thou wouldest smite those whom thou hast taken captive ... set bread and water before them, and let them eat and drink, and depart to their master” (vv.21-22, trans. Brenton). As the prophecy is fulfilled, then, the one-dimensional *ἐχθροί* of Deuteronomy become a force which, although still employed as a means to chastise God’s chosen, is worthy of at least a degree of respect in the form of something akin to guest right (and not called *ἐχθρός*). This trend continues in the *Jewish War* as Josephus moves from an enemy worthy of some consideration in the Syrians to the Romans who, rather than merely being a human means of divine retribution, enjoyed “fortune ... from all quarters passed over to them” and were empowered by “God ... [who] now rested over Italy” (BJ V.367).

With this change comes a commensurate shift in how blame is allotted. While Hebrew disobedience brings about the biblical punishments as well as Josephus’ incident, the framing varies considerably. While in Deuteronomy 28 and 2 Kings 6 Jewish waywardness occasions suffering which is then reported against the backdrop of an unyielding enemy force starving them out, the Deuteronomy text describes events by focusing not on the religious errors of specific citizens but rather upon a general failure to “hearken to do all the words of this law” (v. 58). 2 Kings 6 tends in the opposite direction by focusing on the prophesied cannibalism being enacted through a pair of women, with even King Ahab who “did more wickedly than all that were before him” tellingly blanching to hear of such (1 Kings 16:30). Josephus’ account, then, strikes a middle ground between Deuteronomy 28’s generality and 2 Kings 6’s specificity by pinning the blame on the entire errant sect of the zealots while at the same time abandoning even cursory condemnation of the besieging force, this time the Romans, ostensibly causing such deprivation in the first place.

The effect of these two trends is to progressively shift more and more of the condemnation from the side of the besiegers to some element within the afflicted city. While these trends were already observable in the biblical texts, Josephus takes a remarkable step as he not only humanizes the Romans, but even places God on their side, conspicuously opposed to the zealots. Thus, I have identified the primary topics I will address regarding this passage: the evidence, both philological and thematic, that Josephus' account represents a renewal of expired prophecy in his own time, and the way Josephus frames this renewal to legitimize the Romans (and himself) and at the same time debase the zealots.

#### Bibliography

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