Tacitus, *Histories* II.78

Omens announcing Vespasian’s accession to the Empire

Name of the author: Tacitus  
Date: 103 CE to 104 CE  
Place: Rome  
Language: Latin

Category: Roman  
Literary genre: History

Reference: II.78

Commentary:

After having composed the *Agricola*, the *Germania*, one oratorical treatise the *Dialogue on Oratory*, and having fulfilled a governorship in a consular province, either in Upper or Lower Germania (approximatively between 101 and 104 CE), Tacitus went back to Rome and started to write the *Histories*. This work was most likely completed around 110 CE, and the first three books by 103 or 104 CE (Sage, “Tacitus’,” p. 863; for a presentation of Tacitus’s life see Tacitus, *Agricola* XXI). In the *Histories*, Tacitus deals with the most recent period, that is from 69 to 96 CE. Most of the work has been lost, as only the books one to four and the first third of the fifth book have been preserved.

This text is an excerpt from the second book that opens with the trip of Titus from Palestine to Rome, at the end of 68 CE, so as to bid for the quaestorship. In route he heard about Galba’s assassination and Vitellius’s proclamation and decided to go back to Palestine. Two sections of the second book of the *Histories* deal with the actions of the Flavians in the East (II.1-7; II.74-86). The second section, II.74-86, is focused on the emergence of the Flavian challenge with a clear emphasis on the psychology of the characters, especially of Vespasian. Thus, the military context is almost absent from this section of Tacitus’s narrative, particularly omitting that, in 68 CE, Vespasian had subdued Samaria and Idumea and was preparing the attack on Jerusalem. The text presented here appears after the narrative of Vitellius’s march on Rome in April 69 CE (II.71-73), a situation which led Vespasian to question himself about the advantages and disadvantages of a revolt against Vitellius (II.74-75). Then, Tacitus inserts a speech of the legate of Syria, Caius Licinius Mucianus (*PIR*² L 216), who tries to convince Vespasian to challenge Vitellius’s imperial proclamation and wage war against him (II.76-77). Then, Tacitus stops the chronological narrative and inserts an excursus about the omens that had announced Vespasian’s advent.

It is important to note that omens predicting the Empire for Vespasian or a great destiny for the Flavians appear twice in the *Histories* before this long development (in I.10.3 “The secrets of Fate, and the signs (*ostentis*) and oracles (*responsis*) which predestined Vespasian and his son for power, we believed only after his success was secured”; in II.4.2 it is Titus who in Greece consults a priest who interprets that the entrails were favourable and that “the goddess favoured great undertakings”; Loeb’s translation by John Jackson). Moreover, other authors have dealt with the omens that presaged Vespasian’s accession, especially Suetonius in *Vespasian* V and Josephus in *Jewish War* III.404. We shall analyse Tacitus’s narrative by comparing it to these other sources and highlight the differences between them.

After the speech of Mucianus in which the legate of Syria tried to convince Vespasian about the necessity to wage a war against Vitellius, Tacitus narrates that other men also encouraged Vespasian to do so by arguing that the “prophecies of seers” (*responsa vatum*) and “the movements of the stars” (*siderum motus*) had always been favourable to him (II.78.1). Then, Tacitus adds that, even when he became emperor, Vespasian was not “wholly free from such superstitious belief (*superstitione*),” and illustrates Vespasian’s taste for consulting oracles and interpreting omens by the fact that the astronomer Seleucus was for him a *rector*, that is a “guide” (II.78.1). The use of the term *superstitione* implies that Tacitus judged quite negatively Vespasian’s tastes for haruspicy and astrology, probably because it made him vulnerable to manipulations (on this point, see Ash, *Tacitus*, p. 301-302 and the bibliography). In addition to Tacitus’s critical assessment, other sources confirm that Vespasian was particularly prone to accept the messages of oracles and omens and to use them in his way to rule the affairs of the Empire. We can quote for instance the Greek inscription found in the territory of Ardea in Italy which would show that, around 78-79 CE, Vespasian consulted an Italian oracle so as to know what to do with the German captive Veleda (see *Vespasian, Veleda and the oracle*).
After this short introductory part, Tacitus describes two omens which, at two different times, announced the imperial destiny of Vespasian. It is important to recall that, when he deals with Vespasian’s hope for Empire, Suetonius enumerates a list of eleven omens predicting his future accession (five from his earlier years and six from the time of the Jewish war, see Morgan, “Vespasian,” p. 42). Among these eleven omens, two correspond to the ones narrated by Tacitus: the omen of the cypress which suddenly fell and rose again the next day with more impressive dimensions (II.78.2; also appearing in Suetonius, Vespasian V.4 and in Cassius Dio, Roman History LXV.3; on the reason that could explain Tacitus’s choice of this omen, see Morgan, “Vespasian,” p. 43-44), and the prediction of one priest on the Carmel Mount after having inspected the entrails of one victim sacrificed by Vespasian (II.78.3; Suetonius, Vespasian V.6). As noticed by M. Gwyn Morgan, Tacitus may have known most of the eleven portents narrated by Suetonius, but he decided to make a selection. The two portents chosen differed considerably, as the first one was centred on Vespasian and on his personal development, and the second omen influenced his entourage and forecasted publicly that he would become emperor (see Morgan, “Vespasian,” p. 47-48).

The most important point in Tacitus’s narrative is how he connects these two omens with Vespasian’s successes. For what concerns the omen of the cypress, Tacitus clarifies that it would have happened when Vespasian “was then still a young man,” that is probably before he was twenty years old, around 27-29 CE (Le Bonniec and Hellegouarch, Tacite, p. 223, n. 7). The following sentence: “At first, however, the insignia of a triumph, his consulsiphi, and his victory over Judea (ludaicae victoriae) appeared to have fulfilled the promise given by the omen; yet after he had gained these honours, he began to think that it was the imperial throne that was foretold,” is of particular interest. According to Rhiannon Ash, the Iudaica victoria would refer to Vespasian’s significant victory in June 68 CE when he succeeded to encircle Jerusalem (see Morgan, “Vespasian,” p. 49; Ash, Tacitus, p. 303-304). Tacitus explicitly associates at first the promise of the omen with the initial successes of Vespasian – and among his other victories during the Jewish War –, but he then specifies that Vespasian considered this omen an announcement of a much more prestigious destiny. Even if Tacitus does not say that there is a logical connection between his victory in Judea and then his rule over the Roman Empire – and thus of the world –, this juxtaposition of the motifs of the omens, the Judean conquest and the universal rule may echo an oriental tradition, attested among others by Tacitus in Histories V.13, according to which some ancient writings of Jewish priests contained a prophecy saying that the ruling of the world would be given to men coming from Judea (for other references to this tradition see Josephus, Jewish War VI.312-313; Suetonius, Vespasian IV.5). In Histories V.13, Tacitus refers to this tradition so as to explain why the Jews had not been frightened by the omens that occurred before the destruction of the Temple and which should have been interpreted as signs of the disaster that later affected the Jewish people. According to Tacitus, most of the Jews believed in these ancient writings that prophesised that men from Judea would become the masters of the world, and did not realise that the omens announced their doom. The short passage ends with an interesting reflexion of Tacitus that interprets the prophecy contained in the ancient writings of the Jewish priests by saying that, in fact, these writings predicted the victory of Vespasian and of Titus in Judea, and logically their future accession to the imperial throne.

After the cypress’s omen, Tacitus deals with a much more recent one that may have occurred as early as the summer of 68 CE, that is after the death of Nero and the successes of the operations in Judea (about the dating, see Morgan, “Vespasian,” p. 49-50; Ash, Tacitus, p. 307). This portent, related by Suetonius in a much shorter way, narrates that Vespasian went to Mount Carmel to sacrifice a victim to a deity which has been identified as Carmelus, the eponym god of the mountain. This place was shrouded in religious activity and rivalries. Actually, Mount Carmel was also famous because, in 1 Kings 18, it was the place where the prophet Elijah vanquished the adorers of the Canaanite god Baal by proving that the God of Israel was superior to their god. In that perspective, Barbara Levick considers that Vespasian may have chosen this particular place to offer a sacrifice because of its association with Baal. Vespasian’s religious action could thus have been perceived as a direct challenge to the Jews, as Vespasian would have sacrificed to a god which had been traditionally viewed as a rival to the God of Israel (see Levick, Vespasian, p. 46; Ash, Tacitus, p. 304). The priest, sacerdos, present in the place and named Basilides (only named in Suetonius’s narrative as “the oracle of Carmel god,” Carmeli dei oraculum) examined the entrails of the victim and calls Vespasian that, whatever his plans, “… a mighty home (magna sedes) is granted to you, limitless bounds, and a multitude of men”. This magna sedes having no bounds and inhabited by many men refers of course to the Roman Empire. The most important information which is implicitly given by Tacitus or Suetonius’s narratives of these omens related to Vespasian is that, from his young age, gods supported him to become the ruler of the Roman Empire and manifested their support through signs. Such kind of reasoning fitted in with the ideology according to which the Roman people or a collective entity who has the support of the gods
but one character destined to an extraordinary destiny in a period of dynastical transition – the dynastic change implied by Vespasian’s advent is implicitly mentioned when Basilides asks Vespasian what is his project and if it is to build a house (\textit{domus}), a term which has clear dynastic connotations (see Ash, \textit{Tacitus}, p. 306).

Finally, if we compare Tacitus or even Suetonius’s narratives of the omens that predicted Vespasian’s acclamation as emperor with the corresponding narrative of Josephus in the \textit{Jewish War}, we can assess how much their interpretations of this event differ. Actually, just after Josephus was captured in the spring of 67 CE, Vespasian threatened to send him straight to Nero. Josephus asked for a special meeting with Vespasian and Titus during which he prophesized that both of them would become emperors: “Are you sending me to Nero? Why then? Nero and his successors will not last long before you. You will be Caesar, Vespasian, you will be emperor, you and your son here” (Josephus, \textit{Jewish War} III.401; note that Suetonius and then Cassius Dio include Josephus’s prophecy in their list of omens announcing Vespasian’s advent; see Suetonius, \textit{Vespasian} V.6; Dio \textit{Roman History} LXV.4). Josephus then narrates that, troubled by Josephus’s prophecy, Vespasian started to believe in it, but Josephus introduces a new actor in the explanation of Vespasian’s destiny, the God of Israel: “At the moment, Vespasian attached little credit to this speech; he thought that it was a stratagem of Josephus to save his life. Gradually, however, he was led to believe it, as God was already prompting in him thoughts of empire and foreshadowing the throne by other signs” (Josephus, \textit{Jewish War} III.403-404). Josephus thus justifies Vespasian’s accession to the imperial throne as the result of the will of the God of Israel, presenting himself as God’s interpreter. Moreover, the signs announcing Vespasian’s advent become manifestations sent by the God of Israel to announce his future advent. According to Josephus’s interpretation, the omens announcing Vespasian’s accession to the throne are therefore not presented as the manifestation of the Roman gods themselves, who would have announced the future victory over Judea and their control over the Empire. These omens are presented by Josephus as manifestations of the designs of the God of Israel, an interpretation that fits in with the whole message of his work, according to which the God of Israel sided with Vespasian and Titus to punish the Jews for their sins.

To conclude, contrary to Suetonius who enumerated a list of eleven omens forecasting the advent of Vespasian, Tacitus chose to select only two of them. If the first one occurred during Vespasian’s youth and seems to have played an important role for the personal development of Vespasian, the second on the Carmel Mount announced to a wider audience that Vespasian would become the next emperor. Moreover, Tacitus associates these omens with the Jewish war. First, he says that the omen of the cypress could have been interpreted as the sign announcing Vespasian’s victory in Judea, even if Vespasian knew that the sign pertained to a higher destiny. Second, Vespasian’s choice to offer a sacrifice on the Carmel Mount, probably after his first victories against the Jews, may have represented a challenge for the latter because of the association of the Carmel with the god Baal. Third, even if in this passage Tacitus does not explicitly connect Vespasian’s victory in Judea to his destiny as future master of the Roman Empire and thus of the world, a following passage of the \textit{Histories} (V.13) shows that Tacitus was aware of the oriental tradition that prophesised that men from Judea would be the masters of the world. However, he interprets this tradition in a pro-Flavian sense. For him, the men from Judea were in fact the Roman commanders who succeeded in subduing the revolt in that part of the Empire and submitting the Jewish people. Interestingly, Josephus highlights the fact that the omens announcing Vespasian’s advent were sent by the God of Israel – of whom he appears thus as an interpreter – to announce the victory of Vespasian and Titus during the Jewish War and also their future advent at the head of the Empire. This idea fits in with Josephus’s global argumentation that the God of Israel sided with the Roman commanders to punish the Jews for their sins.

Keywords in the original language:

- \textit{ara}
- \textit{Carmelus}
- \textit{consensus}
- \textit{decus}
- \textit{deus}
- \textit{dominus}
- \textit{domus}
- \textit{exta}
- \textit{haruspex}
- \textit{homo}
Tacitus, Histories II.78

- imperium
- Iudaea
- judaica victoria
- mons
- responsum
- sacrificor
- sedes
- sidus
- simulacrum
- superstitio
- Syria
- templum
- terminus
- vates
- Vespasianus

Thematic keywords in English:

- Carmel mount
- Carmelus (god)
- imperial power
- Jewish God
- Jewish war
- Josephus
- Judea
- omen
- oracle
- prophecy
- religiosity
- sacrifice
- Vespasian

Levick, Barbara, Vespasian (London: Routledge, 1999)
Ash, Rhiannon, Tacitus, Histories, Book II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

Vespasian, Veleda, and the oracle

The emperor Vespasian consults with an Italian oracle what to do with the German captive Veleda

- Read more about Vespasian, Veleda, and the oracle

Text

Tacitus, Histories V.13.1-2

The oriental tradition prophesising that men coming from Judea will become the masters of the world.