



[Tacitus, Histories V.13.1-2](#)

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

Name of the author: Tacitus

Date: 104 CE to 110 CE

Place: Rome

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: History

Title of work: Histories

Reference: V.13.1-2

Commentary:

After having composed the *Agricola*, the *Germania*, 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 (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 fifth book which opens with a long development on Judea (V.1-13). After having introduced the book by narrating the arrival of Titus near Jerusalem (V.1), Tacitus deals with the origins and the customs of the Jews mostly through a critical perspective (V.2-5; about the nature of Tacitus's attacks against Jews's customs see [Tacitus, Histories V.4-5](#)). Then, after a long development about the geography of Judea (V.6-8), Tacitus narrates the main steps of the conquest of Judea by the Romans from Pompey until the Jewish war and the last military operations led by Titus at Jerusalem in 70 CE (V.9-12). The text presented here narrates episodes that occurred before the last assault of the Roman legions on the Temple Mount. In this text, Tacitus recalls that Jews were not able to interpret the various omens that occurred at unspecified periods of time, omens which announced the future defeat of the Jews and the destruction of the Temple. The reasons that Tacitus gives to explain why the Jews did not give credit to these signs are interesting.

Tacitus's *Histories* are pervaded with stories of prodigies and omens (see Morgan, "Vespasian"). Among them, Tacitus seems to have given a special attention to the omens announcing the advent of Vespasian, omens that manifested themselves during his whole life and the last ones during the Jewish war (see especially the prediction of his future advent on the Carmel Mount in [Tacitus, Histories II.78](#); much more of these omens are listed in Suetonius, *Vespasian* V; see also a Jewish interpretation of these omens in Josephus, *Jewish War* III.404). In the text presented here, Tacitus recalls that some prodigies (*prodigia*) occurred but the Jews did not take them for granted as they did not "avert them either by victims or by vows". Josephus also refers to the fact that the Jews did not believe the portents (*terata*), that announced their future desolation (Josephus, *Jewish War* VI.288). The explanations that Josephus and Tacitus give of this attitude of the Jews are however different for two reasons. First, for Josephus, these portents were sent by the God of Israel (Josephus, *Jewish War* VI.310), whereas for Tacitus they were sent by Roman gods. Second, Josephus explains the indifference of the Jews to the portents by the fact that they were deceived and blinded by some charlatans (*apateones*) and by men who falsely pretended that they were sent by God. Tacitus explains this in a different way as he highlights the fact that Jews are against *religio*, that is that they refuse to perform the propitiatory rites which could have enabled to avert the prodigies. He asserts that Jews are only prone to *superstitio*, that is to irrational beliefs (§ 1). This kind of explanation fits in with Tacitus's usual representation of the Jews as embodying extreme otherness and of their customs as being inversions of Roman ones (see **Tacitus, Histories V.4-5**). Attacks against the impiety of the Jews can be found in many other critical texts against them, as for instance when Quintilian presents Moses as "the founder of the Jewish superstition" (*Iudaicae superstitionis auctor*; see [Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria III.7.21](#); for the association between the two texts, see Heubner and Fauth, *P. Cornelius Tacitus*, p. 149).

Tacitus enumerates four portents that should have been interpreted as negative signs by the Jews: the apparition in the sky of contending armies and of flashing arms, the apparition of a fire which illuminated the Jerusalem Temple, and the sudden opening of the doors of the temple going along with a superhuman voice which announced that the gods were departing. It is interesting to note that all the omens mentioned by Tacitus appears



also in Josephus's narrative, even if Josephus lists no less than eight omens and explains them with more details (for the whole list, Josephus, *Jewish War* VI.289-310 and Van Henten, "The World Leader," p. 366-367; about the super-natural enlightening of the Temple, VI.290; about the apparition of armies in the air; VI.298; finally Tacitus combines two omens narrated separately in Josephus, namely the opening of the eastern gate of the courts, VI.293-296, and the super-natural shout in the Temple announcing the departure of the gods, VI.299-300; for a comparison between the two texts, see Le Bonniec and Hellegouarc'h, *Tacite*, p. 200; Van Henten, "The World Leader," p. 374). Among the differences between Josephus and Tacitus's versions of these omens, we can see that Tacitus explains that all Jews indiscriminately misinterpreted these omens because of their *superstitio* and of their refusal to follow the usual propitiatory rites. In a different way, Josephus highlights the fact that most of them made this error because of false prophets, and he recalls that only "eloquent" or learned men, *logioi* – that is men who knew and followed Jewish laws – knew that these were negative omens sent by the God of Israel to announce the future disastrous events that the Jews would have to face (about these *logioi*, see Josephus, *Jewish War* VI.295). The last important point to emphasize concerning the omens selected by Tacitus is that supernatural lights or fires, apparitions of armies in the sky and the announcement of the departure of tutelary gods of a besieged city are portents well attested in other Roman sources, especially in Virgil, *Aeneid* VIII.520-529 (see Bloch, *Antike Vorstellungen*, p. 80-81 and 111; Le Bonniec and Hellegouarc'h, *Tacite*, p. 200; Heubner and Fauth, *P. Cornelius Tacitus*, p. 149-150). By using them, Tacitus implies that the Jews did not take for granted signs which the Romans obviously considered as negative omens announcing the future fall of a city, in this case Jerusalem. Because of their *superstitio*, the Jews did not perform the compulsory propitiatory rites that might have saved them, a decision which turned out to be fatal.

Then, Tacitus goes further into his explanation of the reasons which prevented the Jews from taking these negative omens seriously and writes: "... ancient priestly writings (*antiquis sacerdotum litteris*) contained the prophecy that this was the very time when the East should grow strong (*valesceret Oriens*) and that [men] coming out of Judea would have power". First, it is interesting to note that Suetonius also refers to this oriental tradition that forecasted the future universal domination of men from Judea. In *Vespasian* IV.5, he writes: "There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world" (Loeb's translation by J. C. Rolfe, freely available [here](#); for a comparison between Suetonius and Tacitus's versions see Van Henten, "The World Leader," p. 376-379). In addition, Josephus in *Jewish War* VI.312-313, also alludes to this tradition when he writes: "But now, what incited them most to undertake this war, was an ambiguous oracle (*chr?smos amphibolos*) that was also found in their sacred writings, that at about that time, one from their country would rule the whole world. They interpreted that [i.e. the oracle] as referring to someone of their own people (*oikeion*), and many of the wise men (*sophoi*) were deceived in their judgement (*krisis*). But the saying (*logion*) predicted in reality the rule of Vespasian, who was acclaimed emperor in Judea". The relationship between the versions of Tacitus/Suetonius and Josephus has been largely debated. If Tacitus wrote his *Histories* twenty five years after the composition of the *Jewish War*, scholars disagree about whether Tacitus could have read Josephus's text and have been influenced by it. In a different way, some scholars suggest that the three authors may have had a common source (see Bloch, *Antike Vorstellungen*, p. 19, see in particular the bibliography in Van Henten, "The World Leader," p. 380-381, who however considers that Josephus is the source of the two Roman authors). Comparing Josephus' and Tacitus/Suetonius's narratives, it is striking that all of them mention that this prophecy forecasted that a man (in Josephus's version) or men (in Tacitus' and Suetonius's) coming from Judea would become the master(s) of the world. We can of course question ourselves about the origin of this oriental prophecy, and about the connections between Josephus's reference to this prediction and that made by Tacitus. The first important point is that Josephus's mention of the "ambiguous oracle" has to be understood in his argumentation against the folly of some Jews who, as they did not respect God's statements, caused the doom of Jerusalem (note also that the ambiguity of oracles or prophecies fits in with a Greek tradition that went back to Herodotus). Actually, in the passage just before the mention of the "ambiguous oracle," Josephus alludes to the fact that these maligned Jews decided to destroy the Antonia fortress to make the Jerusalem temple a square temple (Josephus, *Jewish War* VI.311). As rightly noticed by Jan Willem Van Henten, by building this square temple, the Jewish rebels may have wanted to create "the temple of the end times, which may have been triggered by Ezekiel's prophecy about an ideal square temple (Ezk 42:15-20)" (Van Henten, "The World Leader," p. 369). For Josephus, the fact that these rebel Jews built this square temple caused the fall of the city and the destruction of the Temple, as they ignored the oracles (*logioi*) that forecasted that their city and their Temple would be taken when their temple would become four-square. However, Jan Willem Van Henten has rightly emphasized that the oracles mentioned by Josephus are not attested in any biblical text. In the following passage, the "ambiguous oracle" announcing that one man from Judea would become the ruler of the world presents similarities with the previous story. First, by quoting this other example of a sacred oracle misinterpreted by the rebels because of their folly, Josephus must have wanted to present himself as a learned man who knew how to interpret God's words. This position enabled him to assert that Jews had been insane to wage a war against Rome and to justify his own



choice during the Jewish War. Second, Josephus remains very vague about this “ambiguous oracle,” making it hard to know whether Josephus had a specific biblical passage in mind (Numbers 24:17 or Daniel 7:13 mentioning the “One like a Son of Man” might be relevant ones; see Goodman, “Messianism,” p. 152, n. 19; Van Henten, “The World Leader,” p. 371). What seems more obvious is that Josephus implies that the rebels erroneously interpreted this “ambiguous oracle” in a messianic perspective. For them, this oracle meant that a Jewish ruler would soon become the new ruler of the world (about the numerous connections which have been made between this oracle and messianic traditions see Van Henten, “The World Leader,” p. 369, n. 33).

If we compare Josephus’s version of the prophecy to that of Tacitus, we can see that both of them insist upon the fact that Jews, because of their lack of foresight, did not realise that this oriental oracle was just about to come true, not with a Jewish man, but with Vespasian himself. The over-confidence of the Jews about the positive ends of their destiny is presented by both authors as the main cause of their doom. There exist however differences of approach between the two versions. First, Tacitus is more precise than Josephus about the origin of the oracle, as he writes that it comes from the “ancient priestly writings” of the Jews. However, contrary to Josephus, he does not specify that the oracle is ambiguous. The second main difference is that in Tacitus’s version of the prophecy, it refers to men coming from Judea (see the plural of *potirentur*), that is to Vespasian and Titus, contrary to Josephus who alludes to one man from Judea, probably to fit in with the biblical/messianic origin of the prophecy. The third important difference in Tacitus’s version is the association of the prophecy with the idea that “(the) East should grow strong” (*valesceret Oriens*), an idea which is totally absent from Josephus’s text. It has been rightly noticed that this idea may echo other oracles which express the hope that a new ruler coming from the East will put an end to Rome’s domination. We can think of course of the third book of the Sibylline oracles, especially the passage III.191-195 in which the Sibyl predicts that the deceit caused by the Romans will last “until the seventh kingdom,” which will be ruled by a Ptolemaic king. At that time “the people of the Great God,” that is the Jews will become “guides in life for all mortals”. In addition, we can also quote the passage III.350-355, in which the Sibyl forecasts that Asia will avenge itself on Rome for the abuses committed by the later (for a translation and comment on these passages, see Buitenwerf, *Book III*, p. 180, 188-190, 211, 221-224). Finally, in *Divine Institutions* VII.15 that is in the passage in which he deals with Seneca’s theory of the fourth age of Rome, Lactantius ironically recalls that old age is usually followed by death. He then writes that the Sibyls openly assert that Rome will die by the judgment of God. Then, he alludes to a dream of a former king of the Medes, Hydaspes, which, before the foundation of Troy itself, would have been interpreted as announcing that the name and the Empire of the Romans would be destroyed. In this passage, Lactantius reports a commonplace of these kind of oracles, namely that Rome’s empire will end and that “West will be reduced to servitude, and in return East will dominate” (*ac rursus Oriens dominabitur, atque Occidens serviet*) (about the association of Tacitus’s *valesceret Oriens* with these oracles, see Heubner and Fauth, *P. Cornelius Tacitus*, p. 153; Van Henten, “The World Leader,” p. 375).

To conclude, this passage of the fifth book of the *Histories* shows that, no matter whether Tacitus was directly inspired by Josephus’s work or whether they used a common source, the Roman historian was aware of the oracle that prophesied that men from Judea would become the masters of the world. Like Josephus, he insists on the fact that the Jews misinterpreted the various omens precisely because of this oracle; a decision that would be fatal for them. As Josephus, Tacitus interprets this oracle in a pro-Roman perspective, but we have noticed some differences, as for instance the fact that Josephus speaks about one man coming from Judea, a detail which gives the oracle a more messianic tone. In spite of these slight differences, both authors conclude that, if they had not be blinded by their *superstitio* or their folly, Jews should have interpreted the oracle as the announcement of the future acclamation of Vespasian as emperor and should thus have given up resistance. Even if Josephus does not consider the Jewish people nor approaches the Jewish sacred writings said to contain the oracle in the same way as Tacitus does, it is interesting to see that they both use this oracle inspired by a Jewish tradition to boost the prestige of the future Flavian emperor. If Josephus’s mention of this “ambiguous oracle” fits in with the whole teleology of the *Jewish War*, which consisted in proving that the God of Israel had sided with the Roman commanders to punish the Jews for their sins, it is interesting to see that, by referring to the same Jewish oracle, Tacitus presents the authority and the power of the future emperors Vespasian and Titus as being asserted and confirmed – through the oracle – by the God of Rome’s adversary himself.

Keywords in the original language:

- [acies](#)
- [arma](#)
- [caelum](#)



- [delubrum](#)
- [deus](#)
- [fatum](#)
- [foris](#)
- [gens](#)
- [hostia](#)
- [ignis](#)
- [Iudaea](#)
- [littera](#)
- [magnitudo](#)
- [motus](#)
- [Oriens](#)
- [praedico](#)
- [prodigium](#)
- [religio](#)
- [sacerdos](#)
- [superstitio](#)
- [templum](#)
- [Titus](#)
- [Vespasianus](#)
- [votum](#)
- [vox](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [imperial power](#)
- [Jewish God](#)
- [Jewish war](#)
- [Judea](#)
- [Messiah](#)
- [omen](#)
- [oracle](#)
- [prophecy](#)
- [Titus](#)
- [Vespasian](#)

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Text

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Tacitus's excursus about the Jews.

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