

Masada: A Consideration of the Literary Evidence

David J. Ladouceur

FROM A.D. 6 to 66 the citadel of Masada, a formidable natural stronghold used already in the days of the Hasmoneans, quartered a Roman garrison. At the outbreak of the Jewish revolt about midsummer 66, Menahem the Galilean seized the fort at the eastern edge of the Judean desert. After his murder in Jerusalem at the hands of Jewish rivals, its control fell to Eleazar ben Yair, a relation of Menahem and leader of the Sicarii. In 73 the praetorian legate Flavius Silva, in command of the tenth legion, besieged the position. After the defenders' improvised wooden wall had been breached, Eleazar, so the story goes, during the night of 14 Xanthicus through compelling rhetoric induced 960 men, women, and children to commit suicide rather than surrender to the Romans.¹

To some scholars, the Sicarii have appeared heroic freedom fighters who in their single-minded devotion to liberty and God died *Kedoshim Gemurin* (completely holy). Their suicide accordingly has been compared to that of Saul and justified by the principle of *Hillul Hashem*, their depredations of the countryside and massacre of fellow Jews explained away by the zealous precedent of Phineas in the Torah.² To others they have appeared fanatical idealists who attempted through blatant terrorism to force their ideas on their fellow Judeans and so contributed to the destruction of the Jewish state.³ Whether the Sicarii were in fact heroes and whether their suicide was a moral act are subjective questions, the answers to which, depending upon modern preconceptions, have been and will be divergent. Here, therefore, I shall focus on other questions and problems more properly historical.⁴

¹ For invaluable critical bibliography on Masada from 1943 to 1973, see L. H. Feldman, "Masada: A Critique of Recent Scholarship," in J. Neusner, ed., *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults* (Leiden 1975) 218–48.

² S. Spero, "In Defense of the Defenders of Masada," *Tradition* 11 (1970) 31–43.

³ S. Zeitlin, "The Sicarii and Masada," *JQR* 57 (1967) 251–70.

⁴ For the modern influence of Masada and its effect on current foreign policies, see R. Alter, "The Masada Complex," *Commentary* 56 (1973) 19–24.

For the actions of Eleazar and the defenders of Masada the only literary evidence is the account presented in the *Bellum Iudaicum* by Flavius Josephus. Himself a figure of controversy, this Graeco-Jewish historian has appeared to some a realistic patriot, to many more an opportunistic traitor. Why he included so detailed and stirring a record of apparent heroism on the part of a group whom he had opposed is a question that has often been raised in the evaluation of his evidence. Perhaps the 'unfortunate Jew' was conscience-stricken or genuinely overwhelmed by the heroism of the people he betrayed, Yigael Yadin, the excavator of Masada, has suggested.⁵ Yet nowhere else in the *Bellum* does Josephus seem in any way sympathetic toward the Sicarii. In his opinion they were bandits who murdered women and children, fell upon cities and temples, and were the first to set the example of lawlessness and cruelty to their kinsmen (*BJ* 7.262). Even in the seventh book itself, a few sections after the Masada account, he refers to their sedition in Cyrene as ἀπόνοια καθάπερ νόσος (7.437). In itself then a psychological explanation appears insufficient, and the inconsistency remains.

A more radical solution has been proposed by Trude Weiss-Rosmarin.⁶ The mass suicide, she conjectures, never actually took place. What in fact happened was that the Romans, after penetrating the citadel, ruthlessly murdered every man, woman, and child. In this view Josephus' account becomes a mere fiction deliberately composed to exonerate the Romans of the charge of atrocity. H. Feldman has objected that the presence of several thousand soldiers as well as prisoners of war would have compelled Josephus to present a truthful account of such a spectacular event. Otherwise he would have been faced with charges as an unreliable historian.⁷ That Masada was regarded as a spectacular event is perhaps debatable. From contemporary military perspective it was probably only one final operation in an extraordinarily long and bloody war. We should also doubt that anyone in Rome after such a war would have been inclined to charge a Flavian client with misrepresentation of the slaughter of rebellious Jews.

Weiss-Rosmarin's position is, however, ultimately unconvinc-

⁵ *Masada: Herod's Fortress and the Zealots' Last Stand*, trans. M. Pearlman (New York 1966) 15. Cf. Spero (*supra* n.2) 43, "... pressure of truth and admiration in spite of himself."

⁶ "Masada Revisited," *Jewish Spectator* 34 (1969) 29-32.

⁷ Feldman (*supra* n.1) 237.

ing. Modern conceptions of what constituted an atrocity in ancient warfare—especially as here in an armed rebellion that was punishable by crucifixion or the arena—may be anachronistic. In view of the oft-invoked principle *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*, the need for an apologetic fiction becomes less obvious. Moreover, elsewhere in the *Bellum* Josephus does recount in detail Roman brutalities, once even after a pledge of safety was granted.⁸ After all, one of the purposes for which the *Bellum* was written was to deter others from revolt (3.108). The consequences of such revolts therefore at times could be made clear.

Neither personal psychology nor apologetic fabrication thus explains why Josephus inserted this detailed, seemingly heroic account of the deaths of the defenders. The classicist may even object that there is really no problem here, for one well-known *topos* in Graeco-Roman literature and art is the melodramatic and heroic presentation of the deaths of one's enemies. Examples abound: Aeschylus' Persians who are ennobled by their suffering, the dying Gauls heroically depicted at the Great Altar at Pergamum, the awful yet noble barbarian of Caesar's *Commentarii*. While these parallels are illuminating, the *Bellum* nonetheless should not be viewed as a mere patchwork of *topoi* stitched together in a vacuum. Apart from its avowed purpose of deterring revolt, it contains personal apologetics deliberately composed by a man whose own actions were hardly above criticism. When the choice of suicide or surrender confronted Josephus as commander at Jotapata, he chose surrender; Eleazar at Masada chose death. The purposes of the *Bellum*, Josephus' own contrary actions in the war, and the Roman atmosphere in which he was writing all render improbable the supposition that the Jew would have actually wished Eleazar portrayed as a noble and heroic 'barbarian', a sort of Vercingetorix.

Be that as it may, the alleged inconsistency in the historian's presentation of the Sicarii is perhaps only apparent. In his account of their suicide there is more than a touch of irony. In fact, the very notion that Josephus intended the account as a record of heroism reflects in part a failure to address the Graeco-Roman context in which the description would have been read. In what follows I will analyse Eleazar's speech advocating suicide in relation to Josephus' speech at Jotapata condemning it, and then study the historical circumstances in which Josephus composed

⁸ E.g., the general massacre at Jotapata (*BJ* 3.329).

and delivered his work and especially these diametrically opposed speeches. His environment has, it seems, much influenced his narration.

After the capture of Jotapata, Josephus concealed himself with forty other Jews in a cave and remained undetected for two days. On the third day a woman betrayed his hiding place, and the Romans invited him to surrender (*BJ* 3.340–49). Whereas the Jews with whom he is hiding urge mass suicide, Josephus urges surrender and delivers a speech against suicide (3.362–82). The speech itself he introduces with this context. Recalling the nightly dreams in which God has predicted to him the fate of the Jews and the destinies of the Roman sovereign, as an interpreter of dreams and a priest not ignorant of the prophecies τῶν ἱερῶν βίβλων, he recites a silent prayer: ἐπειδὴ τὸ Ἰουδαίων . . . φῶλον κλάσαι δοκεῖ σοι τῷ κτίσαντι, μετέβη δὲ πρὸς Ῥωμαίους ἢ τύχη πάσα, καὶ τὴν ἐμὴν ψυχὴν ἐπελέξω τὰ μέλλοντα εἰπεῖν, δίδωμι μὲν Ῥωμαίοις τὰς χεῖρας ἐκὼν καὶ ζῶ, μαρτύρομαι δὲ ὡς οὐ προδότης, ἀλλὰ σὸς ἀπειμι διάκονος (3.354). In interpreting this prayer H. Lindner, who has endeavored to investigate Josephus' *Geschichtsauffassung*, resorts to Septuagintal usage, where, he notes, ἐπιλέγω in the middle voice is often used of priestly service: the prayer must be understood in relation to sacerdotal cult with God as the principal and Josephus as the servant.⁹

The use of ἐπιλέγομαι for selection to priestly office is not, however, so common in the Septuagint as Lindner believes. There are no examples beyond the three he cites, and two of these occur in passages with consistent variants. In Josephus as in the Septuagint the most common meaning for the verb, whether active or middle, is 'select', frequently in a military sense 'conscript', or 'levy': τῶν δὲ νέων ἐπιλέξας τοὺς ἰσχυροτάτους ἐξακισχιλίους (*BJ* 3.540); ἐπιλέξας ἰπέων τε καὶ πεζῶν ὅσους ἀρκέσειν ὑπελάμβανεν (*BJ* 5.106); μωρίους ἐπιλεξάμενος στρατιώτας (*AJ* 13.91).

It is possible that the phrase τὴν ἐμὴν ψυχὴν ἐπελέξω thus con-

⁹ H. Lindner, *Die Geschichtsauffassung des Flavius Josephus im Bellum Judaicum* (Leiden 1972) 60: "In der LXX wird ἐπιλέγω (Auswahl von Soldaten für die Schlacht usw.) in Medium gern von der Erwählung zu priesterlichen Diensten gebraucht: 1. Kön. 2, 28; 1. Esra 9, 16; 1. Makk. 4, 42, ja auch bei Josephus selbst: a 4, 28 (Bestimmung Aarons). Vielleicht ist auch die Verwendung von ἐπιλέγομαι: in b 3, 354 in diese Linie zu stellen. . . . Werfen wir von hier aus einen Blick auf den Sprachgebrauch des Begriffs διάκονος . . . bei Josephus, so erbigt sich als Grundlage das Verständnis der konkreten Dienstleistung, wobei die Unterordnung des Dienenden unter seinem Auftraggeber meist deutlich ins Auge fällt. . . . Ist Gott der Auftraggeber, so tritt das priesterlichkultische Verständnis besonders hervor."

tains a military metaphor. This possibility is strengthened by a subsequent passage: ὁ Ἰώσηπος καὶ προδοσίαν ἡγούμενος εἶναι τῶν τοῦ θεοῦ προσταγμάτων, εἰ προαποθάνοι τῆς διαγγελίας . . . (BJ 3.361). Together with the phrase ‘betrayal of orders’, the word διαγγελία, ‘notification’, deserves special attention. The noun occurs only here in Josephus and LSJ cite this passage alone. It is used of the messenger duty of Iris in battles: διὰ τῆς Ἰριδος γίνεται διαγγελία ἐν τοῖς πολέμοις (*Etym.Gud.* p.71.52–53 Sturtz). διαγγέλλω is used in Josephus for important military announcements (*Vit.* 98, *AJ* 7.201) as well as for solemn messages of the emperor (*BJ* 6.96).¹⁰ In Thucydides (7.73) διάγγελος is a secret informant or go-between, while Plutarch uses the word in a purely military sense once to refer to an ‘adjutant’ and once as the equivalent of the Latin *optio*.¹¹

Now the expression of one’s relationship to God in terms of a military metaphor is well known in the literature of later Stoicism.¹² Seneca writes, *optimum est pati quod emendare non possis, et deum quo auctore cuncta proveniunt sine murmuratione comitari; malus miles est qui imperatorem gemens sequitur. Quare inpigri atque alacres excipiamus imperia* (*Ep.* 107.9). For Epictetus God is a general who entrusts his soldiers with a post which they must not quit (*Arr. Epict.Diss.* 1.9.24); τούτῳ τῷ θεῷ ἔδει καὶ ὑμᾶς ὀμνύειν ὄρκον, οἷον οἱ στρατιῶται τῷ Καίσαρι . . . (1.14.15–17). Also, the Stoic sage is frequently represented as the ‘servant’ of God—in Epictetus ὑπηρέτης (3.22.95) and ἀκόλουθος and διάκονος (4.7.20), the very word used by Josephus.

In itself the military metaphor is common in ancient religious thought and at times in no way limited to Stoicism, *e.g.*, in the vocabulary of Mithraism. While one cannot simply dismiss Lindner’s interpretation of these passages through Septuagintal usage, such interpretation nevertheless does ignore close pagan parallels. It is at any rate questionable methodology to explicate only through the Septuagint words and phrases isolated from their context in the midst of an Atticizing text directed to a Graeco-Roman audience—all the more when that context is preparatory to a central theme of late Stoicism, suicide.¹³

¹⁰ See G. Kittel, *Theol.Dict.* I 67–69.

¹¹ *Mor.* 678D; *v. Galb.* 24.1

¹² For discussion of the relationship between God and man in the later Stoics, see A. Bodson, *La morale sociale des derniers Stoiciens Sénèque, Epictète, et Marc Aurèle* (Paris 1967) 82ff, esp. 88 on their military metaphors and language.

¹³ On Stoic attitudes toward suicide see J. M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge 1969)

After his companions refuse to surrender and threaten to kill him if he complies with the Romans' demand, Josephus delivers his long oration against suicide (*BJ* 3.362–82). The speech, not surprisingly, follows closely the conventional rules for the *genus deliberativum*, with *exordium* (362), *tractatio* (363–78), and *conclusio* (379–82). The *exordium* is a combination of *principium a nostra persona* and *ab auditoribus*. The *tractatio* discussing the course of action is divided into three *topoi*—*utile* (363–64), *honestum* (365–67), and again *honestum* (368–69). The *conclusio* is in emotional language and illustrates the *amplificatio* typical of this section.¹⁴

The argument against suicide is essentially philosophical and grounded not in Jewish teaching but in Greek philosophy. Since there is no specific injunction against suicide in the Pentateuch, the *σοφώτατος νομοθέτης* (377) who punishes suicide may well be Plato. This is of course not remarkable, for, as Hirzel demonstrated,¹⁵ the text of Plato played an ambiguous role in antiquity, both as a justification for suicide and as an argument against suicidal tendencies manifested in this very period, the late first century. The *loci classici* are *Phaedo* 61B–62D and *Laws* 873CD. In *Phaedo* Socrates states that it is unreasonable to kill oneself before a god sends some compulsion: *ἴσως τοίνυν ταύτη οὐκ ἄλογον μὴ πρότερον αὐτὸν ἀποκτείνουσαι δεῖν, πρὶν ἀνάγκην τιὰ θεὸς ἐπιπέμψῃ*. The ambiguity lay in the definition of *ἀνάγκη*, and the passage could be used to justify or condemn suicide depending on the circumstances. Earlier Socrates asks Cebes whether men are one of the possessions of the gods. When Cebes answers positively, Socrates continues *οὐκοῦν . . . καὶ σὺ ἂν τῶν σαυτοῦ κτημάτων εἴ τι αὐτὸ ἑαυτὸ ἀποκτινύοι, μὴ σημήναντός σου ὅτι βούλει αὐτὸ τεθνάναι, χαλεπαίνοις ἂν αὐτῷ, καὶ εἴ τινα ἔχοις τιμωρίαν, τιμωροῖο ἂν;*

233 *et passim*; Bodson (*supra* n.12) 90ff. For a general study of suicide in antiquity, see R. Hirzel, "Der Selbstmord," *ArchRW* 11 (1908) 75–104, 243–84, 417–76; and now Y. Gris , "De la fr quence du suicide chez les Romains," *Latomus* 39 (1980) 17–46.

¹⁴ For an historical survey of Roman rhetoric, G. Kennedy, *The Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World, 300 B.C.–A.D. 300* (Princeton 1972); M. L. Clarke, *Rhetoric at Rome* (London 1953), esp. 109 for the period under discussion. Cf. R. Ullmann, *La technique des discours dans Salluste, Tite-Live et Tacite* (Oslo 1927). The terms used to analyze the speech at hand are the standard ones derived from Book III of Quintilian.

¹⁵ *Supra* n.13: 451ff, balanced by Gris 's study, a useful counter to the notion that suicide was a "maladie contagieuse" or "mode" among the Romans: "il n'existait pas de courant suicidog ne chez les Romains" (18); suicide was an exceptional act practiced in exceptional circumstances (46).

(62c). In section 372 Josephus follows nearly verbatim this argument of the *Phaedo*. In another indication of the Atticizing nature of the speech, at 378 he refers to Jewish practice (nowhere else attested) with regard to the disposal of the corpse and to the well-attested Athenian custom of burying hand and body separately (Aeschin. *In Ctes.* 244).

Eleazar's speech, though it is in fact removed some four books from Josephus' oration, clearly presents an *ἀντίλογος* to that speech (7.323–36, 341–88). Individual arguments which Josephus poses against suicide are here countered.¹⁶ Furthermore, W. Morel, in a source study of Eleazar's speech, has demonstrated the extent to which citations from classical literature infuse the oration.¹⁷ In addition to references to Euripides and Posidonius, Eleazar alludes frequently to Plato: to *Laws*, *Phaedrus*, *Cratylus*, and, significantly for our purposes, at least five times to *Phaedo*. Here, however, the dialogue is used in its second role as a justification for suicide with the support of the *ἀνάγκη* clause. God brings on the *ἀνάγκη* (7.330); *τούτων τὴν ἀνάγκην θεὸς ἀπέσταλκε* (7.387).

Also, like Josephus, Eleazar uses the well-known *ἐλευθερία/δουλεία* *topos*. In Josephus' speech, however, *ἐλευθερία* hardly functions in a political sense. Rather it expresses a sort of freedom in relation to choosing the time and manner of one's death: it is slavery to inflict death unwillingly upon oneself simply in fear of death at the hands of one's enemies (3.366–68). Eleazar, on the other hand, in the first part of his speech (323–36) uses *ἐλευθερία* in a religio-political sense. For him freedom entails "being a slave to neither the Romans nor any other except God" (323). According to Josephus (337–40) this speech did not fully persuade his audience. In the second part of his speech Eleazar again invokes *ἐλευθερία*, but now also in a more philosophical or spiritual sense, ". . . life not death is man's misfortune. For it is death which gives liberty to the soul . . ." (343–44). That eternal form of liberty stands in marked contrast to a more secular, temporary liberty. "And is it not foolish, while pursuing liberty in this life, to grudge ourselves that which is eternal" (350). Pursuing this philosophical argument, Eleazar alludes to such examples as Indian self-immolation and now adduces the Platonic *Phaedo* as a counterargument. He also delineates the hideous punishments that await them if they

¹⁶ E.g., *BJ* 3.368 against 7.324; 3.370–71 against 7.387.

¹⁷ "Eine Rede bei Josephus," *RbM* 75 (1926) 106–15.

are captured alive (373–74). It was this second speech, according to Josephus (389), that immediately impelled the defenders to their final act.

In his own speech, therefore, Josephus passes over the political aspects of *ἐλευθερία*. The Jewish historian may well have agreed with the Tacitean sentiment, “only fools confuse *libertas* with *licentia*” (*Dial.* 40). We may well suspect, however, that the notion of ‘no master but God’ was fundamental to the religio-political conception of the Sicarii.¹⁸ Yet Josephus plays down the persuasiveness of that notion in Eleazar’s speech, and emphasizes the philosophical arguments. Apart from distorting what was perhaps fundamental to the Sicarii, Josephus seeks to transform Eleazar into a sort of philosopher, a figure that would have had, as will be argued shortly, many actual counterparts in the historian’s contemporary Roman environment.

The lengthy analyses of these speeches in Michel and Bauernfeind’s commentary¹⁹ and in Lindner²⁰ do not take into account this Graeco-Roman context in which this *λόγος* and *ἀντίλογος* on suicide were delivered. The former have been concerned to demonstrate the existence of genuine Jewish traditional material beneath Hellenizing embellishment. For them, the sections on the soul (7.354–57) “die in unserem Text als eschatologisches Element einen besonderen Platz erhält,” pose “ein literarisch und religionsgeschichtlich eigenes Problem.”²¹ Feldman too has suggested that the process at work here may be not unlike that Hellenized reworking of the Bible which Josephus practices in the first half of the *Antiquities*.²²

It may be taken as a sign of indolence or good sense to regard the contents of both speeches as so much philosophic *koine* without trying to sort out specifically Jewish, Platonic, and Pythagorean elements. That some genuine Jewish stratum lies below to be detected rests upon two assumptions: that Josephus had a reliable source for the speech of Eleazar, and that he preserved that information intact or at least in such a way that it can be recovered

¹⁸ See S. Applebaum, “The Zealots: The Case for Reevaluation,” *JRS* 61 (1971) 155–70.

¹⁹ O. Michel and O. Bauernfeind, *Flavius Josephus, De Bello Judaico, Der Jüdische Krieg* II.2 (Munich 1969) 276ff. See also their “Die beiden Eleazarreden in Jos. bell. 7, 323–336; 7, 341–388,” *ZNTW* 58 (1967) 267–72.

²⁰ H. Lindner (*supra* n.9) 33ff.

²¹ *Flavius Josephus* (*supra* n.19) 277.

²² Feldman (*supra* n.1) 239.

simply by removing the Greek trappings.²³ The analogy with his work on the Bible, moreover, does not apply. He was not dealing here with a sacred text but with the alleged words of an arch-enemy, one of the revolutionaries whose actions he does not even pretend to represent *sine ira et studio*. As for Jewish traditional material, the use of *σφαγή* (7.398) in an apparently cultic sense and the selection of a group of ten to carry out the killing hardly in themselves suggest an 'eda event.²⁴ Finally, beyond rhetorical embellishment or personal prejudice, the well known freedom with which Greek historians composed speeches makes it naïve at best to treat any large section of this speech as reflecting Eleazar's actual words. Certainly no one can take uncritically the image of Eleazar, with the Romans about to strike, quoting Plato, Posidonius, and Euripides as well as furnishing Indian parallels to a group of devout Jews.²⁵

The question of Josephus' reliability must remain problematic since in this matter he is our only source and he does exhibit *Tendenzen*. To turn now to the problem of context, in the Neronian and Flavian periods the propriety of suicide was not merely an ethical issue, to be debated in philosophical coteries. Nor for that matter were philosophical coteries often simply coteries. In addition to the reality of suicides to avoid conviction, throughout the first century, as MacMullen has shown, the cult of the Republican Cato, Stoic martyr and suicide, was repeatedly turned politically against the Roman emperors.²⁶ Cato had admittedly become a stereotyped figure of virtue for schoolboys to declaim upon, but at times a too spirited presentation of his life and sufferings could

²³ For fundamentalists, the only possible source could be the relative of Eleazar who, together with an old woman and five children, survived by hiding in subterranean aqueducts (*BJ* 7.339). Josephus' precise knowledge of the disposition of the siege equipment suggests access to Roman military records, perhaps the *commentarii* of the commander Flavius Silva. This is only speculation, however. Even if this woman, whom Josephus describes as "superior in sagacity and training to most of her sex," could have heard the speech from her position and retained it, such a speech would hardly be material for a military record. Clearly one could continue to multiply possibilities. The fact remains that Josephus himself nowhere explicitly claims *commentarii* as his source.

²⁴ Michel and Bauernfeind, *ZNTW* (*supra* n.19) 272.

²⁵ On the practice of inserting speeches, see F. W. Walbank, *Speeches in Greek Historians* (Oxford 1965). For the *topos* of Brahman self-immolation in Imperial writers, see E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge 1965) 62.

²⁶ For the cult of Cato and also of Brutus, see R. MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order* (Cambridge 1966) 1–45; P. Oecchiura, *La figura di Catone Uticense nella letteratura latina* (Turin 1969). For philosophers as subversives, MacMullen 46–94.

provoke reaction: between July 74 and July 75, Curiatus Maternus delivered his *Cato*, a *praetexta* dedicated to the Republican hero. The delivery was evidently too enthusiastic. According to Tacitus, the *animi potentium* (Vespasian and Titus) were offended, *eaque de re per urbem frequens sermo haberetur*.²⁷

Similarly, but with more devastating results, Thrasea Paetus under Nero had written his *Cato*, apparently modeled on the *Phaedo*, and shortly thereafter was forced to commit suicide.²⁸ His wife was Arria, daughter of Caecina Paetus, who, by his wife's example, had committed suicide in prison under Claudius.²⁹ Both Thrasea Paetus and Caecina and his wife survived in the Trajanic literature as examples of heroic political suicide (Tac. *Ann.* 16.25ff; Pliny *Ep.* 3.16, the famous *Paete, non dolet* letter).

In the hagiographic tradition on Cato set down by Josephus' contemporary Plutarch, it was said that he had spent his final hours reading the *Phaedo*.³⁰ The topic of suicide, especially when connected with this dialogue, may well have had political overtones by association with the Stoic martyr par excellence as well as with his guardian philosopher Paetus. More pertinent to the Flavian regime and to our inquiry, the man who married the daughter of Paetus and shared his father-in-law's political doctrines was none other than Helvidius Priscus, the leader of the so-called Opposition to Vespasian. After Paetus' death, Priscus had assumed control of the family group in which there had been so much disaffection and so many memorable political suicides. In addition to composing his own book in praise of Cato, he had greeted Vespasian on his return to Rome simply as 'Vespasian', omitting the Emperor's titles. According to Suetonius, so much disrespect did he show the Emperor that he seemed to be nearly depriving him of his status. Vespasian, according to Dio, hated him "because he was a turbulent fellow who cultivated the mob and was forever praising democracy and denouncing the monarchy."³¹ It was about 75, when Maternus was delivering his *Cato*, that Helvidius

²⁷ Tac. *Dial.* 2.1: *cum offendisse potentium animos diceretur, tamquam in eo tragoediae argumento sui oblitus tantum Catonem cogitasset*. For a discussion of Maternus' career see R. Syme, *Tacitus* I (Oxford 1958), esp. 104ff. The date is derived from the reference to the sixth year of Vespasian's reign in *Dial.* 17.3.

²⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 16.35. On Thrasea see A. Sizoo, "Paetus Thrasea et le stoïcisme," *REL* 6 (1926) 229–37.

²⁹ *PIR*² c 103; for family connections see Syme (*supra* n.27) II 559ff.

³⁰ Plut. *Cat.Min.* 68.2. See also Hirzel (*supra* n.13) 456.

³¹ Cass. Dio 65.12.2; cf. Suet. *Vesp.* 15.

Priscus was executed and Demetrius the Cynic, who had shared Paetus' last hours, was exiled.³²

In fact there is much evidence to reveal that the political atmosphere in Rome in the very period in which Josephus was composing the *War* was rather tense.³³ Besides Vespasian's difficulties with Helvidius, there were misgivings about the succession of Titus. The first expulsion of the *philosophi*, Rostovtzeff once proposed, may have been actuated by Stoic-Cynic opposition to hereditary succession to the principate.³⁴ Be that as it may, it is clear from Suetonius that before Titus came to the throne there was a general uneasiness: *denique propalam alium Neronem et opinabantur et praedicabant* (Tit. 7.1). His actions as *praefectus praetorio*, especially his summary execution of Caecina, hardly gained him a reputation for *clementia*. Nor did his liaison with Berenice, Mommsen's 'miniature Cleopatra', and a Jew, allay fears of orientaling tendencies. About 75 two expelled Cynics slipped back into Rome and fanned popular opposition to a possible marriage. One, Diogenes, delivered a lengthy invective in a theatre and was promptly flogged. The other, Heras, having later delivered a similar oration, was beheaded (Cass. Dio 65.15). The punishment meted out to the second and the repressive steps taken to insure against a repetition suggest that Titus took the matter quite seriously. And well he might. The ability to reenter the city and preach sermons in the theatre implied powerful backing which in turn intimated a deliberate attempt to organize overt discontent.³⁵

In a stimulating article, Zvi Yavetz has suggested that the picture of Titus presented in the *War* as a man imbued with *clementia* "reflects more prevalent attitudes in the society in which Josephus moved when writing than any real historical person acting in

³² On Priscus see C. Gatti, "C. Helvidius Priscus, disciple et héritier de Thræsea," *ParPass* 30 (1975) 23ff. For the view that Helvidius Priscus adopted Cynicism and that Cynics were invariably anarchists, see J. M. C. Toynbee, "Dictators and Philosophers in the First Century A.D." *G&R* 13 (1944) 51–56. For an assessment of Dio as a source in this matter see G. Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome during the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge 1950) 147–50.

³³ J. Crook, "Titus and Berenice," *AJP* 72 (1951) 162–75, still valuable. More recently, Z. Yavetz, "Reflections on Titus and Josephus," *GRBS* 16 (1975) 411–32, esp. 427ff, and P. M. Rogers, "Titus, Berenice and Mucianus," *Historia* 29 (1980) 86–95.

³⁴ M. I. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*² II (Oxford 1957) 591 n.34.

³⁵ For the precautions, Suet. *Tit.* 6.1: *qui per theatra et castris quasi consensu ad poenam poscerent.*

Judea.”³⁶ Titus might have welcomed any effort to change his popular image. The historian, a Flavian client and friend of sorts, perhaps understood the situation, and his portrait of Titus, endowed with *clementia*, a virtue *maxime . . . decora imperatoribus* (Sen. *De clem.* 1.5.1), soon followed.³⁷

If the interests of Roman politics have colored the portrait of Titus, so also, I would argue, they may have influenced the characterization of Eleazar. It is perhaps more than coincidence that the form and content of his speech have much in common with the so-called Stoic-Cynic diatribe,³⁸ and also that like some Cato he goes to his suicide only after reciting the required lines from Euripides and Plato’s *Phaedo*.

To submit, however, that the portrait of Eleazar is a caricature of some specific member of the Opposition or of a Stoic-Cynic preacher is to be perhaps too exact. In the Neronian and Flavian periods the spectrum of disaffection passed by nearly imperceptible gradations from simple discontent to conspiracy. Even to locate the so-called Opposition on this spectrum is difficult. Nevertheless, the political tensions outlined above suggest that where there was smoke there was also fire. Boissier’s old view of *l’Opposition* as harmless literati was distorted by his experience with the ineffectual literary salons under the tolerant Napoleon III.³⁹ Forms of radical Stoicism which blended into Cynicism in this period might well be alluded to in this portrayal, and such sympathies could be located in the families and friends of men like Priscus who venerated political suicide.

At first sight all this may appear too subtle and purposive. Yet some literature among the upper class Opposition of this period was characterized by an allusiveness or encoding.⁴⁰ Recently, for

³⁶ *Supra* n.33: 430.

³⁷ Yavetz (*supra* n.33) 424.

³⁸ Michel and Bauernfeind, *Flavius Josephus* (*supra* n.19) 269, *cf.* 277: one could analyze that speech in much the same way R. Bultmann analyzed Pauline sermons, *Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe* (Göttingen 1910). One should not press the argument too far. Recent research suggests that the so-called Stoic-Cynic diatribe was perhaps not a distinct literary form nor necessarily Stoic-Cynic: H. Rahn, *Morphologie der antiken Literatur. Eine Einführung* (Darmstadt 1969) 156; G. L. Kustas, *Diatribe in Ancient Rhetorical Theory* (Berkeley 1976). On the use of Stoic-Cynic political philosophy in protest from the first to fifth centuries, see R. MacMullen, “The Roman Concept Robber-Pretender,” *RIDA* 10 (1963) 221–25.

³⁹ G. Boissier, *L’Opposition sous les Césars*⁵ (Paris 1905: first ed. 1875); for criticism, Wirszubski (*supra* n.32) 129ff, MacMullen (*supra* n.26) 1–94.

⁴⁰ MacMullen (*supra* n.26) 36–40.

example, J. D. Bishop has emphasized the political character of Seneca's tragedies and analysed the elaborate code of disaffection to be found in *Oedipus*.⁴¹ In a literary work too frequent references to the wrong mythological figure could under Domitian prove fatal.⁴² Though the present allusion may be more specific than we can now ascertain, one need not seek some crude equation (Eleazar = Priscus). It is perhaps safer to say that in depicting Eleazar, Josephus seems to invest the figure with certain philosophical characteristics, the political significance of which would not have been lost on a Graeco-Roman audience in the 70s.⁴³

In this context it is therefore not implausible to sense political overtones in Josephus' speech as well, which reverses the interpretation of the Opposition's stock Platonic dialogue and asserts τῶν μὲν γε ζῳίων οὐδὲν ἔστιν ὃ θνήσκει μετὰ προνοίας ἢ δι' αὐτοῦ (3.370). Whether the reader was supposed to lay stress on the word προνοίας must remain unknown. The vocabulary of 'proper' Stoicism which was naturally Roman was not unknown to Josephus, as we have seen.

If the speeches are politically motivated, they are brilliant pieces of rhetoric that shift attention away from his own act as an insurgent general—an act that his audience might have regarded as traitorous and cowardly—to the interests of Roman politics. In a sense his own speech becomes not only a moral rejection of suicide but also an assertion of political allegiance to Vespasian and Titus. Opponents of the regime and perhaps more particularly those who venerated their models of suicide are left with the fanatic spouting the required lines from *Phaedo* before enjoining his own and others' suicide. While political conflict in Flavian Rome concerned power, not suicide, suicide cannot be dismissed as a mere gesture, given its central place in the preoccupations of the Opposition. The value of Eleazar's speech against opponents of the regime is obvious. Talk of freedom, slavery, suicide puts one in the same category as Jewish fanatics who killed themselves on a god-forsaken summit in Judea.

One might object that Josephus appears to portray the defenders as heroes. Yet nowhere in this description does the historian de-

⁴¹ "Seneca's *Oedipus*: Opposition Literature," *CJ* 73 (1978) 289–301.

⁴² MacMullen (*supra* n.26) 38–39.

⁴³ Compare C. P. Jones' contention that the early anti-philosophical works of Dio reflected his Flavian connection and were directed against Helvidius' brand of Stoicism which sympathized with the libertarian views of the Cynics: *The Roman World of Dio Chrysostom* (Cambridge 1978) 15–16.

pict the Sicarii as actively fighting against the Romans. When the Romans enter the citadel they are astonished at their unwavering contempt of death (*ἄτρεπτον . . . καταφρόνησιν*, 7.406). The terms, as Feldman has noted, seem to have a Stoic coloring,⁴⁴ but this does not necessarily imply Roman admiration for the dead. Stoicism in this period was an extraordinarily complex phenomenon that embraced certain principles innately Roman as well as the ideology of fringe groups that verged on an almost anarchistic Cynicism. The intended audience would probably make the right connection, as in the case of *πρόνοια*.

There is a further reason to doubt that Josephus' readers will have thought the suicide heroic. To a Greek audience there was indeed a conception of glorious death in battle, albeit in their present state of servitude and assimilation somewhat fossilized. In essence it consists of death in battle with the enemy of one's native land. The idea of anticipatory suicide is completely absent.⁴⁵ To the Roman, suicide in battle was commendable only in special circumstances, the *devotio*, a half-legendary form of suicide in which the general or substitute soldier swore an oath before the pontifex, devoting himself and the enemy to the underworld, and then charged into the midst of the enemy to be killed. At least among the upper classes in this period, the religious association of this act still had power. The ironic force of Tacitus' description of the death of Galba in 69 derives from his emphasis on the location of the emperor's death, near the Lacus Curtius, where centuries earlier Curtius had devoted himself by leaping down into a chasm that had mysteriously opened: while his death brought about safety for the state, Galba's ironically results in only more bloodshed for the state.⁴⁶ To these Greek and Roman attitudes Josephus himself may be playing when he states in his argument against suicide *καλὸν ἐν πολέμῳ θνήσκειν, ἀλλὰ πολέμου νόμῳ, τουτέστιν ὑπὸ τῶν κρατούντων* (3.363).

Furthermore, the very last of Eleazar's arguments, which persuades the defenders to commit suicide, is the threat of the physical torture which the Romans will inflict upon them (7.384–88). The historian may be attempting here to draw a distinction between

⁴⁴ Feldman (*supra* n.1) 244.

⁴⁵ For a recent survey of attitudes toward suffering and death as well as deliberate self-sacrifice in Classical, Hellenistic, and Jewish literature, see S. K. Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event: the Background and Origin of a Concept* (Missoula 1975).

⁴⁶ *Hist.* 1.41. On this passage see R. T. Scott, *Religion and Philosophy in the Histories of Tacitus* (Rome 1968) 60–61.

the defenders' deaths and deaths of martyrs in the Maccabean tradition. *γενναιότης τοῦ βουλευμάτος* (7.406), a phrase reminiscent of that used in descriptions of martyrs' deaths, may well be ironic, therefore, especially when so closely joined with *τῶν πεφονευμένων*, 'the murdered', not simply 'the slain' (Thackeray). While there may have been power or sincerity in their resolve, their action, according to Josephus' terms, was still impiety and murder (cf. 7.417, *εἴτ' ἀπόνοιαν εἶτε τῆς γνώμης ἰσχὺν χρηὴ λέγειν*). Nor is *τόλμημα* (7.405) 'fortitude' (Thackeray): here as elsewhere in the *War*, Josephus describes Jewish military action as motivated by 'audacity' or 'boldness' (*τόλμα, τόλμημα*) inspired by *ἀπόνοια*. In general *ἀρετή* attended by *λόγος* is reserved for describing Roman military action. (One of the few times such *λόγος* fails is in the obviously apologetic account of the burning of the temple, when one soldier, inspired by some supernatural impulse [*δαιμονίῳ ὄρμηϊ*, 7.252], throws the firebrand that starts the final conflagration.)

In Roman ethnographical descriptions, however, the theme of barbarian *temeritas* is often found side by side with the *topos* of the heroic barbarian who must confront the choice of *servitus* or *libertas*.⁴⁷ While Caesar in his *Commentarii* ascribes *mobilitas* and *levitas* to the Gauls, he also inserts the *libertas* theme at the beginning of Books II and III and states *omnes . . . homines natura libertati studere et condicionem servitutis odisse* (3.10.3). There were nonetheless limits which even barbarians should observe. Caesar criticizes Critognatus for suggesting that the besieged at Alesia practice cannibalism (7.77.2, 12). Likewise Tacitus, who often includes the *servitus/libertas* theme, condemns the Caledonians for their actions in circumstances very similar to those of Masada: *satis . . . constabat saevisse quosdam in conjuges ac liberos, tamquam misererentur* (Agr. 38.2).

What is involved in the Masada account is less the *topos* of the noble barbarian and far more a theme well known in Silver Age epic, *amor mortis*.⁴⁸ In his grim and single-minded determination on death, Josephus' Eleazar resembles Lucan's Vulteius urging his men to commit mutual suicide, *proieci vitam, comites, totusque futurae / mortis agor stimulis: furor est* (4.516–17). Vulteius' suicide pact, as one man kills the other, becomes for Lucan a miniature of civil *nefas*, and accordingly the poet draws in such mythological

⁴⁷ For discussion of this theme see A. N. Sherwin-White, *Racial Prejudice in Imperial Rome* (Cambridge 1967) 21–25, 33–61.

⁴⁸ On this theme see W. Rutz, "Amor mortis bei Lucan," *Hermes* 88 (1960) 462–75.

references as the *spartai* and the Theban brothers Eteocles and Polynices.⁴⁹ For Josephus also this vivid description of Jew murdering Jew serves well his recurrent theme: the Jews have often been their own worst enemies, and from the days when fighting between the brothers Aristobulus and Hyrcanus led to Roman intervention down to this final tragedy, Jews have often brought destruction upon themselves. Thus the melodramatic scene probably was meant to inspire amazement in his Graeco-Roman audience rather than commendation, and to argue that Josephus wished to portray the end of the Sicarii as heroic ignores the ambience in which the narrative was written.

Josephus' account of Masada, seen in its Graeco-Roman context, can only induce skepticism. More than Hellenization is at work. Josephus' presentation of himself at Jotapata, together with his portrayal of Eleazar at Masada, seems to reflect the interests of the environment in which he composed the *War* far more than the actuality of a choice of life and death some years earlier in Judea.⁵⁰

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⁴⁹ 4.549–51. For analysis of the Vulteius episode see F. M. Ahl, *Lucan, an Introduction*, (Ithaca 1976) 117–21.

⁵⁰ My thanks to John Oates, who read a draft of this article during my tenure of an NEH grant at Duke University.