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JOSEPHUS'S BLUNTING OF AMALEK AND
PHINEHAS THE ZEALOT IN *JEWISH ANTIQUITIES*:
A STATEMENT AGAINST NATIONALISM

JACOB INMAN

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Abstract: This paper proposes that the famous Jewish historian—Titus Flavius Josephus—purposefully changed the violent biblical narratives of the Israelites' encounter with the Amalekites (Exod 17:8–15) and the story of Phinehas the zealot (Num 25:6–15) in his parallel accounts found in *Jewish Antiquities* (*Ant.* 3.39–62 and *Ant.* 4.139–155 respectively). I argue that Josephus made these changes out of his own bitterness and opinions about the First Jewish Revolt (66–73 CE), to discourage nationalistic violence, to portray the Jews as a nonviolent people, and to show his Roman patrons that the Jews are not a weak race.

Titus Flavius Josephus—general, historian, and apologist—is as invaluable as he is unreliable in some respects. Very rarely do ancient sources survive the test of time, and the academic world is extremely fortunate to read a firsthand account of one of the most important events in Jewish history—the First Jewish Revolt (66–73 CE). In this sense, Josephus's work *Jewish War* is invaluable in that it provides otherwise unknowable details concerning the social, political, and economic climate leading up to the revolt against Rome. After the war, Josephus wrote his massive work, *Jewish Antiquities*, which is also extremely important but carries with it many questionable interpretations and reconstructions of the biblical text. How did Josephus's experiences and feelings about the war affect his writings? While the purpose of writing *Antiquities* was not to address Josephus's own postwar feelings, I will argue that Josephus's bitterness and opinions about the war certainly affected his recounting of Jewish history. Specifically, this study seeks to unveil how and why Josephus deliberately altered violent narratives of the Pentateuch, using the Israelites' encounter with the Amalekites (Exod 17:8–15; *Ant.* 3.39–62) and the story of Phinehas the zealot (Num 25:6–15; *Ant.* 4.139–155) as case studies. I will argue that Josephus deliberately made these changes to discourage

nationalistic violence, portray the Jews as a nonviolent people, and show his Roman patrons that the Jews were not a weak race.

To best demonstrate this, I will first compare what life was like for Josephus in Rome with the circumstances of most Jews post-70 CE. Doing so will bring to light several of Josephus's biases and will provide the context in which Josephus is writing *Antiquities*. Next, some general observations about *Antiquities* will be considered to further understand who Josephus's intended audience may have been. Once this foundation is laid, I will first work through the biblical text of the Amalekites, noting which details the biblical author includes and which he omits. Josephus's *Antiquities* will then be critiqued and compared with the biblical narrative, noting any scriptural liberties that Josephus takes. This same approach will then be applied to the Phinehas story. Finally, I will draw conclusions based on the evidence presented that Josephus did in fact manipulate these stories to condemn nationalistic violence and those who condone it, please his Roman patrons, and present the Jews as a powerful—but not rebellious—race. This conclusion will be congruent with Josephus's feelings about the rebellion against Rome and will help provide a greater context in which to better understand Josephus's interpretations of violent scripture.

REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP

As some of the most important primary sources of information surrounding the First Jewish Revolt and Second Temple Judaism, the works of Flavius Josephus have drawn the attention of numerous biblical scholars, historians, and even lay religious people. This interest stems largely from Josephus's new insights on the Bible and his retelling of historical events. Accordingly, an exhaustive review of scholarship on Josephus will not be attempted here, but rather only the scholarship as it pertains to the discussion of Josephus's reworking of violent biblical narratives.

To begin, it is first necessary to discuss the most prominent and recent scholars to treat Josephus's character, motives, and works in a broad sense. Scholars Tessa Rajak, Louis Feldman, and Steve Mason best fit into this category. Tessa Rajak's book *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* analyzes Josephus's attitudes toward the First Jewish Revolt. While the main focus of this study will not be *Jewish War*, Rajak's conclusions about Josephus's character and attitudes in light of his sociopolitical background crosses over neatly into an analysis of *Jewish Antiquities*. For example, Rajak asserts that Josephus went to Rome with characteristics of a Greco-Roman upbringing coupled with

his distinctly Jewish responsibilities and identity. She argues that these characteristics greatly affect his approach to the biblical text.¹

Louis Feldman similarly addresses Josephus's background and character in his works *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible* and *Studies in Josephus's Rewritten Bible*.² These two publications serve as companions in some respects, with the former primarily dealing with principles that guided Josephus in his understanding of the Bible,³ and the latter seeking to examine why and how Josephus changed specific stories or characters. Feldman asserts that Josephus is writing *Antiquities* in the guise of midrash, in that Josephus is retelling the Bible but supplementing his rendition with his own defenses and justifications.⁴ This is the case with Israel's war with the Amalekites, as well as with the account of Phinehas's "zeal."

Steve Mason edited the most recent translation and commentary on Josephus's works.⁵ While Feldman's translation and commentary from this same series will be consulted for the *Antiquities* narratives,⁶ Mason's translation and remarks in *Judean War*⁷ and the connections he makes between *Life of Josephus* and *Antiquities* will be relied on throughout this study.⁸

To my knowledge, relatively few scholars have written about Josephus's interpretation of violent text specifically. Certainly, each of the biblical books has been compared with Josephus's version in *Antiquities*, but this study seeks to go further in analyzing whether Josephus consistently sanitizes these stories to demonstrate that nationalistic violence is an improper response to foreign rule. Louis Feldman once again has done excellent work in this area, treating our specific cases where Josephus changes the Amalek and Phinehas narratives. Feldman's book "*Remember Amalek!*" makes suggestions as to why Josephus embellishes or otherwise justifies Israel's war on the Amalekites,

1. Tessa Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* (London: Duckworth, 2002), 44–45.

2. Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible*, HCS 27 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and Louis H. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus's Rewritten Bible*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 58 (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

3. Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible*, xiv.

4. Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible*, 16.

5. Steve Mason, ed., *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, 10 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1999–).

6. Louis H. Feldman, trans. and comm., *Judean Antiquities 1–4*, vol. 3 of *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, ed. Steve Mason (Leiden: Brill, 2000). This translation will be used for all passages quoted from *Antiquities* unless otherwise noted.

7. Steve Mason, trans. and comm., *Judean War 2*, vol. 1b of *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, ed. Steve Mason (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

8. Steve Mason, trans. and comm., *Life of Josephus*, vol. 9 of *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, ed. Steve Mason (Leiden: Brill, 2001), xiv–xv.

as we will examine in our case study later on.⁹ Feldman also systematically works through the Phinehas narrative in a similar fashion in his article “The Portrayal of Phinehas by Philo, Pseudo-Philo, and Josephus.”¹⁰ Outside of our case studies, Chris Frilingos wrote an article about the embellishment of Esther, where Josephus noticeably inserts God as an actor into the story and Josephus includes his own moral interpretation of the execution of Haman (*Ant.* 11.247, 267–268).¹¹ Frilingos further argues that this story is composed in light of the author’s “immediate surrounding and the imperial Roman-era language of violence.”¹²

Most recently, Michael S. Kochin wrote an article entitled “Freedom and Empire in Josephus,” dealing precisely with Josephus’s political stances on war by understanding where Josephus fits in the realm of ancient political thought.¹³ Kochin’s main argument is that Josephus purposefully presents aristocracy as the preferred form of government in *Antiquities* and links kingship with idolatry to appeal to Rome’s distaste for kingship as well as to show that the Jews would not return to kingship.¹⁴ These insights are useful in determining whether these violent narratives fit into this mold of Josephus continually criticizing nationalistic tendencies against foreign rule.

Finally, Robert Eisen has recently explored how the violent passages of the Bible have been interpreted from the biblical period to modern Zionism. His book *The Peace and Violence of Judaism* points out the ambiguity of these texts, and his chapter on rabbinic interpretation of violence is interesting when comparing Josephus’s suggested readings of the Bible with that of the early rabbis around the same period.¹⁵

9. Louis H. Feldman, in “Remember Amalek!": *Vengeance, Zealotry and Group Destruction in the Bible according to Philo, Pseudo-Philo, and Josephus* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004), 27–45.

10. Louis H. Feldman, “The Portrayal of Phinehas by Philo, Pseudo-Philo, and Josephus,” *JQR* 92 (2002): 315–45.

11. Chris Frilingos, “‘It Moves Me to Wonder’: Narrating Violence and Religion under the Roman Empire,” *JAAR* 77 (2009): 825–52.

12. Frilingos, “‘It Moves Me to Wonder,’” 832.

13. Michael S. Kochin, “Freedom and Empire in Josephus,” *History of Political Thought* 39 (2018): 16–32.

14. Kochin, “Freedom and Empire in Josephus,” 17–27.

15. Robert Eisen, *The Peace and Violence of Judaism: From the Bible to Modern Zionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

JOSEPHUS'S JOURNEY TO ROME

Josephus was an experienced politician (*Life* 12–16), soldier (*J.W.* 2.566–568), and writer (*Ant.* 20.262–266).¹⁶ He was a Jewish priest of royal descent, and though there is some debate on whether all Sadducees were priests and vice versa,¹⁷ Josephus informs us that he personally worked his way through *each* sect until he settled on identifying himself as a Pharisee by the age of 19 (*Life* 1.10–12). As such, Josephus apparently spent some time as a Sadducee, even though he seems to emphasize throughout his works that he certainly is not one.¹⁸ Rajak makes the interesting point that it would suit Josephus well to at least *present* himself as a Pharisee post-70 CE, because the Pharisees were the only respectable sect remaining after the war.¹⁹ After Josephus's reluctant time as a war general in the revolt, Josephus miraculously dissuaded Vespasian from taking him as a prisoner during the siege at Jotapata (*J.W.* 3.341–408) and was granted Roman citizenship where he wrote his four works (*Life* 423).²⁰

Before making Rome his permanent home, Josephus witnessed and documented the destruction of the temple. He makes clear in *War* (*J.W.* 7.253–262) and *Antiquities* (*Ant.* 18.23–24) that it was civil strife, not the Romans, that was to blame for this tragedy.²¹ There are two groups in particular that Josephus condemns: the Zealots and the Sicarii. The Zealots appear to have

16. Perhaps to downplay his controversial surrender to the Romans (discussed later), Josephus was eager that everyone knew how great of a writer and person he was. At the end of *Antiquities*, often considered the prologue of *Life*, Josephus boasts that no other historian (Jewish or otherwise) has accomplished what he has accomplished in writing such an accurate history of his people, and all in the Greek language. For additional commentary on Josephus's occupations, see Rajak, *Josephus*, 4, and Mason, *Life of Josephus*, xiv.

17. Lester L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), here 2:487.

18. See the commentary on *Life* 10–11 in Mason, *Life of Josephus*, 15–19.

19. Rajak, *Josephus*, 33. Rajak remarks that once the Sadducees and the Essenes had disappeared after the war, Pharisaism was what survived under the direction of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai at Yavneh. She also disputes the claim made by recent scholars that Josephus's seemingly hostile attitudes toward the Pharisaic sect changed from *War* to *Antiquities*, arguing that Josephus was not always hostile toward the sect in *War*, and the sect itself did in fact change after the outcome of the war.

20. Upon convincing his small group of soldiers to enter a suicide pact with each other rather than give themselves up to the Romans, Josephus was left to escape and was brought before Vespasian. Protesting being sent to Nero, Josephus prophesied that Vespasian would become caesar. Vespasian eventually believed him, and thus begins Josephus's patronage to the Roman Empire. See also Rajak, *Josephus*, 185–94.

21. Notably, Josephus mentions in *Life* 17–18 that he noticed the beginnings of rebellion against Rome upon returning from his rescue mission of priests held captive in Rome (*Life* 13). Feldman makes the connection that perhaps Josephus's favorable view toward Rome began here, as he not only secured the priests held captive but also was sent back to Judea with gifts from Nero's consort Poppaea Sabina (Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible*, 149).

originated as an unorganized group of peasants from outside Jerusalem that fled to Jerusalem upon the Romans arriving in Judea about 67 CE (*J.W.* 4.128–138). In response to the Romans taking their land, this group organized a coalition against the Romans *and* the priestly aristocracy in Jerusalem by attempting to set up their own government, robbing, and murdering their own people in broad daylight (*J.W.* 4.138, 147–150). After the Zealots managed to murder Ananus the high priest and take control of Jerusalem,²² they retained control of the temple despite their infighting until its destruction in 70 CE.²³ Josephus does not withhold his feelings about this group when he said, “for so [the ‘Zealots’] called themselves, as though they were zealous in the cause of virtue and not for vice in its basest and most extravagant form” (Josephus, *J.W.* 4.161 [Thackeray, LCL]).

The Sicarii are introduced in *War* as a group of knife-wielding assassins, first famous for their murdering of Jonathan the high priest. We are next informed that this murder was the beginning of many, and that the people began to fear even their friends because the Sicarii managed to spread panic wherever they were (*J.W.* 2.254–257).²⁴ Josephus’s most clear condemnation and blame of the Sicarii for the war, however, is found in *Antiquities*:

22. Josephus presents Ananus delivering a very moving speech intended to incite the people of Jerusalem against the Zealots. Other than the speech succeeding to this end, the speech may also show additional insight into Josephus’s feelings about the Zealots. Ananus (or rather, Josephus) says “that even should we fall beneath their arms—God forbid that those words should ever be our lot!—we can suffer no greater cruelty than what these men have already afflicted upon us. . . . Is it not lamentable, that, while the Romans never overstepped the limit fixed for the profane, never violated one of our sacred usages, but beheld with awe from afar the walls that enclose our sanctuary, persons born in this very country, nurtured under our institutions and calling themselves Jews should freely perambulate our holy places, with hands yet hot with the blood of their countrymen?” (*J.W.* 4.180–183, [Thackeray, LCL]). This presents a binary view with the Romans being relatively nonviolent and tolerant toward Jews, contrasted with the Zealots who are violent toward their own people.

23. For an excellent summary of the role of the Zealots in *War*, see Richard A. Horsley, “The Zealots: Their Origin, Relationships and Importance in the Jewish Revolt,” *NovT* 28 (1986): 159–92.

24. Determining what Josephus meant by *sicarii* turns out to be a complex issue. Contrary to the view that the Sicarii were a group of Zealot extremists, Marijn J. Vandenberghe has recently written that the term *sicarii* may have been used as a rhetorical device by Josephus to brand a specific rebel group (different from the Zealots) he held directly responsible for the outbreak of the war. For a full discussion, see Marijn J. Vandenberghe, “Villains Called *Sicarii*: A Commonplace for Rhetorical Vituperation in the Texts of Flavius Josephus,” *JSJ* 47 (2016): 475–507. His work largely builds off Mark Andrew Brighton’s work, *The Sicarii in Josephus’s Judean War: Rhetorical Analysis and Historical Observations*, EJL 27 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), which argues that the term *sicarii* stems from a Roman legal term meaning “assassins” and may have been a label given originally by the Romans to this group. Brighton argues that Josephus’s main animosity toward the Sicarii is centered on their *exclusive* murdering of their own people, whereas

These gangsters . . . committed these murders not only in other parts of the city but even in some cases in the temple; for there too they made bold to slaughter their victims, for they did not regard even this as a desecration. This is the reason why, in my opinion, even God Himself, for loathing of their impiety, turned away from our city and, because He deemed the temple to be no longer a clean dwelling place for Him, brought the Romans upon us and purification by fire upon the city, while He inflicted slavery upon us together with our wives and children; for He wished to chasten us by these calamities. (*Ant.* 20.163–165 [Feldman, LCL])

After about three decades of reflecting on the destruction of the temple, Josephus concludes that the reason why the temple fell, and why the Jews were taken into slavery, was because the Zealots and Sicarii were killing their own people, even in the temple. Once the temple was destroyed and the Romans had made their final preparations for breaching Masada, Eleazar gave his famous speech and the Sicarii men and women committed mass suicide to die for their cause (*J.W.* 7.389–406). Mark Brighton argues that Josephus uses the Sicarii's mass suicide at Masada less as a heroic last stand against the Romans and more as the culmination of divine punishment against the group responsible for the war.²⁵

Josephus's life after the war wasn't too bad for a captured war general and jobless priest. He writes in *Life*:

When we came to Rome, I was met with every provision from Vespasian. He even gave me lodging in the house that was his before the *imperium*. He honored me with Roman citizenship. He gave me a stipend for supplies, and continued [these] honors until his departure from life, taking back nothing of his goodness toward me—which brought me into danger on account of envy. (*Life* 423 [Mason])

Josephus's newly acquired citizenship earned him tracts of land he never lived on, imperial pensions, and no other responsibilities aside from writing his later works.²⁶ Indeed, Josephus's comfortable lifestyle in Rome starkly contrasts with that of his fellow Jews who were denied the privilege of Roman citizenship. In the years following the destruction of the Second Temple, Rome generally did not relinquish her grip on Judea or the Jewish people. Important

the Zealots were more of a freedom-fighting group focused on killing Romans. He notes that the Sicarii are unlikely to be affiliated at all with the Zealots, because the Sicarii leave Jerusalem for Masada before the freedom-fighting of the Zealots even begins (144). Steve Mason goes further to suggest that Josephus's use of a Latin term in his Greek work may be indicative of Josephus's audience. Josephus does not define *sica* or *sicarii*, but does explain the murderous activities of Judeans with daggers. See Mason, *Judean War* 2, 207–8.

25. Brighton, *The Sicarii in Josephus's Judean War*, 142.

26. For more on Josephus's land allotments see Rajak, *Josephus*, 11, as well as Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible*, 55 for more on Josephus's responsibilities.

to note, however, Rome was tolerant of Judaism as a religion but was careful to preempt another demonstration of political nationalism.²⁷

One of the first steps Vespasian took to discourage a second revolt was replacing the annual temple tax with the *Fiscus Judaicus*. This allowed Judaism to be a *religio licita*, but at the price of sponsoring the Roman deity that conquered the God of Israel.²⁸ Domitian reinforced this tax “most assiduously” as Suetonius recounts in his *Life of Domitian*:

The Jewish tax was exacted most assiduously. To the *Fiscus Judaicus* were reported those who lived as Jews without declaring this or who by concealing their origin did not pay the tribute imposed on their people. I recall when I was a young man being present when an old man in his nineties was examined by a procurator and a very large number of advisers to see whether he was circumcised. (Suetonius, *Life of Domitian* 12.2 [Reinhold])²⁹

Whether hiding Jewish identity to avoid this tax or being secretly accused of *acting* Jewish and not paying this tax, one could expect a violent visit from Domitian’s tax collectors. Silvia Cappelletti suggests that Domitian’s seemingly sudden change in fiscal policy may be due, in part, to unexpected expenses for the rebuilding of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus that burned down in 80 CE, as well as to replenish funds spent on the temple inauguration ceremony that took place about a decade later.³⁰ In addition to the *Fiscus Judaicus*, Cassius Dio reports that Domitian executed many people, including his own cousin

27. E. Mary Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule: From Pompey to Diocletian, A Study in Political Relations*, SJLA 20 (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 344.

28. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule*, 345. Other scholars have challenged the view that the *Fiscus Judaicus* was an act of intolerance. Instead, scholar Leonard Rutgers and others suggest that the Jewish tax must be viewed in the greater context of Vespasian’s tax policy. Rutgers asserts that the Jewish tax, then, was more likely an act of ingenuity on the part of Vespasian for redirecting an already existing tax, and the Jews were just one group of many in the empire required to pay taxes. For Rutgers’s full discussion, see Leonard Victor Rutgers, “Roman Policy toward the Jews: Expulsions from the City of Rome during the First Century C.E.,” in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 93–116, here 111–14. Additionally, Josephus and Cassius Dio contradict each other as to whether it was all “ethnic” Jews who were forced to pay the tax (Josephus) or if only “orthodox” Jews had to pay this tax (Cassius Dio). For a detailed discussion about this point, see Silvia Cappelletti, *The Jewish Community of Rome: From the Second Century B.C. to the Third Century C.E.*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 113 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 100–117. In response to Rutgers, Cappelletti and the primary sources, I argue that the fact Jews had to pay the tax is less important than what the tax represented. What is certainly clear is that the sacred half-shekel once paid to the temple in Jerusalem was now forcibly redirected to Rome and its pagan gods. Vespasian was not leaving a chance for the Jerusalem Temple to be rebuilt.

29. See translation and commentary in Louis H. Feldman and Meyer Reinhold, eds., *Jewish Life and Thought among Greeks and Romans: Primary Readings* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 345.

30. Cappelletti, *The Jewish Community of Rome*, 129–30.

Flavius Clemens, for adopting certain practices of Judaism.³¹ Other Jews, Jewish “sympathizers,” and “atheists” were deprived of their property.³²

Vespasian further used the victory over the Jews as propaganda to endorse his newly acquired emperorship. Josephus records that Vespasian and Titus hosted a great procession in Rome where the victory over the Jews was celebrated with parade and sacrifice. The procession ended at the temple to Pax, where the Jerusalem Temple utensils and ornaments were displayed (*J.W.* 7.123–162). Between the half-shekel Jewish tax paid to build pagan temples and the propaganda laid by Vespasian and his successors regarding the victory over the Jews, the Romans made their position clear that the Jewish temple was not to be rebuilt.

These were the circumstances and context in which Josephus wrote *Antiquities* ca. 93–94 CE. Faced with criticism from his peers and feeling the need to defend his Jewish loyalties, Josephus endeavors to rewrite the history of the Jews “before they entered this last war against their will” (*Ant.* 1.6).³³ There is some debate among scholars as to whom *Antiquities* was primarily written. In light of the passages we will analyze next, Feldman’s assertion that Josephus was writing to Greeks, Roman patrons, and a smaller Jewish audience seems most likely.³⁴ To assure his audience that he would write an accurate history of the Jews, Josephus prefaces his work with the famous, but hollow, promise to write “neither adding nor omitting anything” (*Ant.* 1.17).³⁵

31. Martin Goodman contests that Suetonius’s account is not evidence that many were attracted to Judaism in Domitian’s time, as other scholars profess. Goodman writes, “I remain unconvinced by claims that Domitian punished less important non-Jews for Judaizing by subjecting them to the special tax, while more important non-Jews were executed for the same crime.” He acknowledges that Cassius Dio’s account and the coins issued by Nerva seem to indicate this phenomenon of non-Jews taking on Jewish practices, but the standard view that there were many non-Jews taking on Jewish practices is not well supported. See Martin Goodman, “The *Fiscus Iudaicus* and Gentile Attitudes to Judaism in Flavian Rome,” in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, ed. Jonathan Edmondson, Steve Mason, and James Rives (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 167–77, here 169.

32. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 67.14.1–2. See also Feldman and Reinhold, *Jewish Life and Thought among Greeks and Romans*, 346. “Atheism” here refers to the rejection of pagan gods. As the Jews openly (or secretly) rejected the Roman pantheon, atheism was a charge many Jews were convicted of. See Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule*, 379.

33. Josephus defends the historicity of *Antiquities* and his reputation as historian in *Ag. Ap.* 1.1–6.

34. Feldman, *Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible*, 47–49. Josephus specifies that he is writing to the Greeks and for at least one of his Roman patrons in *Ant.* 1.5, 10, but Tessa Rajak argues that Josephus’s primary audience was always the Jews of the diaspora (see Rajak, *Josephus*, 178).

35. See Feldman, *Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible*, 37–46 for Feldman’s nine theories as to what Josephus may have meant by this phrase. Something should also be said here about the potential sources used by Josephus in writing *Antiquities*. Generally, the majority of scholars believe that Josephus was using both a Hebrew and a Greek text,

CASE ONE: THE AMALEKITE WAR

With a suitable introduction of the circumstances and context in which Josephus is writing *Antiquities*, we begin our case study of Josephus's rendition of the Amalekite war. The biblical account found in Exodus 17 is a mere eight verses long:

⁸Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. ⁹Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some men for us and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." ¹⁰So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. ¹¹Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. ¹²But Moses' hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the sun set. ¹³And Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword. ¹⁴Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." ¹⁵And Moses built an altar and called it, The Lord is my banner. He said, "A hand upon the banner of the Lord! The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." (Exod 17:8–15 NRSV)

The author of Exodus was incredibly terse with the details of this war. The text provides no indication as to why this war happened or even who the Amalekites were. What is clear in these verses, however, is that the God of Israel prevailed against the Amalekites, the Amalekites will be utterly blotted out from under the heavens, and the Lord will war with the Amalekites for generations to come. Meager in the details but firm in its meaning, this story presents a nationalistic pride among the Israelites, chillingly backed by God's command of genocide on the Amalekites for generations to come.³⁶

with perhaps a few targums (see Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible*, 14–23). The use of multiple sources to write *Antiquities* thus becomes difficult when trying to reconcile Josephus's version of a narrative found in the Bible. The narrative passages that are currently being considered do not vary significantly between the Hebrew and Greek versions. Instead, it appears that Josephus may have been elaborating these texts using a variety of traditions known at the time, and perhaps Josephus was also using vocabulary and phrases typical of classical Greek literature. For an extensive study of Josephus's sources, see Harold W. Attridge, *The Interpretation of Biblical History in the Antiquitates Judaicae of Flavius Josephus*, HDR 7 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press for HTR, 1976), 29–41.

36. Avi Sagi has written an article analyzing the moral problems and complexities involved with interpreting this text morally or literally. He argues that while literalists attempt to "justify the text as is, the moral trend strives to *reinterpret* the text in the light of moral assumptions" (see Avi Sagi, "The Punishment of Amalek in Jewish Tradition: Coping with the Moral Problem," *HTR* 87 (1994): 323–46, here 346). Additionally, Robert Eisen has gathered and commented on the work of many scholars regarding the ideology of "non-participation" in the wars of the Hebrew Bible. The theory suggests that "Israel does not

What should Josephus do with a passage like this? If he blames the Zealots and the Sicarii for their nationalistic motives but wants to present the Jews as a strong race, Josephus must somehow retain his Jewish pride while also shrouding uncomfortable details about the Jews' treatment of other races. Early rabbis living near the time of Josephus identified the Roman Empire as the new Amalekites, further complicating this passage's implications.³⁷ How do you justify wiping out an entire race "from generation to generation"? You make them the worst race ever to exist. Where the Hebrew text uses only 119 words to tell this story and the LXX uses 184, Josephus employs an astounding 1,039 words to fill in the "untold" details of why the Amalekites are the worst people imaginable.³⁸

Due to the length of Josephus's account, a summary must suffice. Josephus begins the Amalek narrative by first elevating the Israelite's fame throughout all the land. Other nations began to fear the Hebrews, and the Amalekites—"the most warlike of the peoples there" (*Ant.* 3.40)—began conspiring with neighboring kings to engage in a preemptive attack against Israel (*Ant.* 3.39–42). Meanwhile, Moses and the Israelites were not expecting any hostilities, and Josephus is sure to include that the Hebrews had virtually no resources, whereas the Amalekites were well equipped with "weapons, money, food, and the other things" (*Ant.* 3.43). Upon learning of the Amalekites' intentions, Moses delivers a motivating speech about God's aid in past difficult times and then assures the Hebrews that they should not have any problems going to war with the Amalekites (*Ant.* 3.43–48).³⁹ Joshua is then selected as general, Moses himself commands the preparations for war, and Moses gives a final encouraging speech to Joshua and the people before marching off to battle (*Ant.* 3.49–52).⁴⁰ Finally, Moses's hand raising results in an Israelite victory,

fight for itself—rather, God fights for the Israelites." Eisen argues that cases such as these, where God is put in a warrior context, the stories may be exaggerated in a way to reflect the seventh century BCE biblical author's insecurities in the midst of an imminent enemy invasion. See Eisen, *The Peace and Violence of Judaism*, 51–52.

37. Eisen, *The Peace and Violence of Judaism*, 104–5.

38. For a breakdown of word comparisons between the biblical text and *Antiquities*, see Feldman, "Remember Amalek!," 27–28.

39. Feldman suggests that Josephus intentionally inserts the suddenness and unexpectedness of the attack as means to promote sympathy for the Israelites in Feldman, *Judean Antiquities 1–4*, 242.

40. Joshua is one of Josephus's heroes. Clearly unsatisfied with Exodus's portrayal of Joshua as a simple yes-man in these verses, Josephus includes that Joshua was "a most courageous man and excellent in enduring toil and most capable in understanding and in speech, one who worshipped God outstandingly and who had made Moyses [*sic*] his teacher of piety toward Him and who was honored among the Hebrews" (*Ant.* 3.49). Moses is also one of Josephus's heroes in these verses and throughout *Antiquities*. Josephus portrays Moses commissioning forces to guard the water he had just sprung from a rock and

the Israelites amass a great wealth from the war spoils, Moses builds an altar, and Moses *predicts* that the Amalekites would perish with utter annihilation (*Ant.* 3.53–60).

The changes and expansions that Josephus makes in his account of the Amalekite war are unquestionably intentional. Where the Bible did not offer an explanation for the war, the conditions the Israelites were in before the war, or who the Amalekites were, Josephus takes the liberty of filling the reader in on each of these details. The Amalekites were a paranoid and warlike people, and the Israelites were completely caught off guard by this attack. Moses's role is enhanced to depict a war general capable of uplifting his troops with powerful speeches, and the Israelites' conditions improve after the war. Perhaps the most noticeable change is the absence of God's decree to utterly blot out the Amalekites from generation to generation. God is completely removed from Moses's *prediction* that the Amalekites would perish "because they attacked the Hebrews, and that while they were in the desert land and exhausted" (*Ant.* 3.60).⁴¹ Verse 55 is particularly interesting, where Josephus states: "This was the most splendid and most timely victory that our ancestors won. For they overcame their attackers and injected fear into their neighbors." Josephus takes this problematic episode and manipulates it by putting the Israelites wholly on the defensive, but victorious nevertheless. This accomplishes his design to squash nationalistic overtones while still presenting the Jewish people as warriors.

CASE TWO: PHINEHAS THE ZEALOT

Our second case study explores the actions of Phinehas the zealot, found in Numbers 25. Before Phinehas's act of "zeal," the biblical account begins the story with Moabite women luring away Israelite men to worship their gods (Num 25:1–2). Troubled by this, God commands Moses to gather all the chiefs of the people who have yoked themselves to Baal Peor (the Midianite god) and impale them in the sun for all to see (vv. 3–5). Our pericope then follows:

⁶Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman into his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the Israelites, while they were weeping at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁷When Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he got up and left the congregation. Taking a spear in his hand, ⁸he went after the Israelite man into the tent, and pierced the two of

staying up all night instructing "Jesus" [Joshua] in war strategy (*Ant.* 3.50). For more on Josephus's portraits of Joshua and Moses, see Feldman, *Josephus' Rewritten Bible*, 376–460, as well as Feldman, "Remember Amalek!," 32–33.

41. Feldman, "Remember Amalek!," 37.

them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. So the plague was stopped among the people of Israel. ⁹Nevertheless those that died by the plague were twenty-four thousand. ¹⁰The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ¹¹"Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites. ¹²Therefore say, 'I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. ¹³It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites.'" ¹⁴The name of the slain Israelite man, who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri son of Salu, head of an ancestral house belonging to the Simeonites. ¹⁵The name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi daughter of Zur, who was the head of a clan, an ancestral house in Midian. (Num 25:6–15 NRSV)

Unlike the Amalek case, the author of this pericope in Numbers did not relent in providing gory details. Phinehas appears to not have hesitated in grabbing a spear and running it through not just Zimri, but Cozbi as well in one fell swoop. The Lord (through Moses) praises Phinehas for his zeal and promises him a covenant of peace as well as a perpetual priesthood for him and his posterity.

Why would Josephus modify this heroic story? After all, Phinehas was a priest like Josephus, and other rabbis living near the time of Josephus generally applaud Phinehas for his actions.⁴² The difficulty of the Phinehas narrative for Josephus is that it does not mesh well with his attitudes toward those who disregard the law and act radically in the name of the divine. In other words, the fact that Phinehas is a zealot who receives a twofold blessing from God for acting similar to how the Zealots acted during the Jewish War toward Rome is problematic.⁴³

To remedy this, Josephus enshrouds Phinehas's act in a sea of added context.⁴⁴ He begins the story with Hebrew youths being seduced by Midianite women. The Midianite women agree to marry the youths on condition that the youths prove their loyalties to them by worshipping their gods, arguing that their gods are common whereas Judaism's God is not. The Hebrew youth submit to these stipulations and drag prominent men into Midianite worship

42. Feldman, "The Portrayal of Phinehas," 318–19. Phinehas's example set a precedent for people like Mattathias in 1 Maccabees, who killed a Jew that was attempting to offer a sacrifice on a heathen altar (1 Macc 2:26).

43. Feldman, "The Portrayal of Phinehas," 326–27.

44. Josephus cuts the actual verses about Phinehas's zealotry nearly in half, while on the other hand twenty-nine times as many verses are devoted to the context of the story. See Feldman, "The Portrayal of Phinehas," 316.

practices (*Ant.* 4.131–140).⁴⁵ Eventually, Zimri the Israelite begins consorting with Cozbi, and Moses anxiously calls an assembly of the people to plead that they repent and change their ways. In a detail completely absent from the biblical text, Zimri rebels against Moses in *Antiquities*, accusing him of being a tyrant and hypocrite who enslaved the people under the guise of God's laws (*Ant.* 4.141–150). Moses then dissolves the assembly, and Phinehas kills Zimri and Cozbi, setting off a chain reaction of young men slaying many of the transgressors (*Ant.* 4.151–155).

Josephus makes some interesting omissions and additions. Whereas in the biblical story there was no chance at repentance, Josephus's Moses explicitly invites the people to repent before any serious action is taken. Zimri's speech is entirely new to the story, again in an attempt to justify killing only the worst of people. Feldman comments that not only is Zimri's speech against Moses's leadership, but it also attacks Judaism's core belief of exclusivity. In effect, Zimri is proposing that Judaism be more open to other religious views.⁴⁶ Equally noticeable, Josephus purposefully omits the distinction of Phinehas being a zealot as well as God's twofold blessing that should follow. Each of these changes soften the zeal of Phinehas without necessarily downplaying Phinehas's righteous intent. Josephus does, however, insert the positive description of Phinehas: "Being superior in both daring of soul and courage of body, to such a degree that if he should be involved in any danger, he did not leave until he had prevailed and obtained victory in it" (*Ant.* 4.153). This description is simply a weak attempt to give Phinehas some mortal praise (as opposed to divine approval) without condoning his action.

CONCLUSION

The war with the Amalekites and the story of Phinehas's zeal are just two places in *Antiquities* where Josephus manipulates the biblical narrative to fit his political ideology and feelings towards the kind of nationalistic violence that brought down the temple in Jerusalem. The Amalekite conquest of the Bible is a nationalistic story, perhaps originally written in similar circumstances to that of Josephus, where an oppressed group was attempting to assert their identity in the midst of stronger foreign powers.⁴⁷ Josephus needed only to tweak

45. There are a few interesting things going here. Feldman notes that Josephus is caught with the dilemma of answering the criticism made against the Jews that they were illiberal, while also making sure not to condone intermarriage. This results in a massive expansion of this story designed to have generic meaning to his contemporary Jewish readers tempted by pagan practices. See Feldman, *Judean Antiquities 1–4*, 378 fn. 393.

46. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities 1–4*, 380 fn. 408.

47. Eisen, *The Peace and Violence of Judaism*, 52.

the story to show that the Jews are not a violent people and that the Romans were not the new Amalekites. The story of Phinehas as told by Josephus demonstrates that rebelling against legitimate authority and legislature does not work. Additionally, the Jews offer a hand of mercy (via repentance in this case) before acting violently. Sanitizing the biblical text like this is found elsewhere in *Antiquities*, such as the omissions of Moses slaying an Egyptian (Exod 2:12) or Elijah being called a zealot (1 Kgs 19:19). Whoever Josephus's readers were, the message of *Antiquities* was clear: the Jews are powerful warriors, but not because they are an inherently violent or rebellious people.