

VESPASIAN AND THE OMENS IN TACITUS *HISTORIES* 2.78

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DISCUSSION OF THE VARIOUS OMENS that Tacitus records in the *Histories* has tended to concentrate on their religious aspect and what that tells us, or fails to tell us, about the historian's personal beliefs. My purpose is, first, to assess the literary and—to a lesser extent—the historical criteria behind Tacitus' selection of the portents he records in *Histories* 2.78; and second, to argue that, unless we take the measure of the design which shapes his narrative, we run a very real risk of misunderstanding the purport and purpose of his account.

We need first to set the scene. Having provided Vespasian himself with two chapters in which to ponder the advantages and—still more—the disadvantages of a revolt against Vitellius (2.74–75), and Mucianus with a lengthy oration meant to bolster the Flavian's wavering resolve (76–77), Tacitus opens our chapter with the reactions to that speech:¹

[1] *post Muciani orationem ceteri audentius circumsistere hortari, responsa vatium et siderum motus referre. nec erat intactus tali superstitione, ut qui mox rerum dominus Seleucum quendam mathematicum rectorem et praescium palam habuerit.* [2] *recursabant animo vetera omina: cupressus arbor in agris eius conspicua altitudine repente prociderat ac postera die eodem vestigio resurgens procera et latior virebat. grande id prosperumque consensu haruspicum et summa claritudo iuveni admodum Vespasiano promissa, sed primo triumphalia et consulatus et Iudaeae victoriae decus implese fidem ominis videbatur: ut haec adeptus est, portendi sibi imperium credebat.* [3] *est Iudaeam inter Syriamque Carmelus: ita vocant montem deumque. nec simulacrum deo aut templum—sic tradidere maiores —: ara tantum et reverentia. illic sacrificanti Vespasiano, cum spes occultas versaret animo, Basilides sacerdos inspectis identidem extis 'quidquid est' inquit, 'Vespasiane, quod paras, seu domum exstruere seu prolatare agros sive ampliare servitia, datur tibi magna sedes, ingentes termini, multum hominum.'* [4] *has ambages et statim exceperat fama et tunc aperiebat: nec quidquam magis in ore vulgi. crebriores apud ipsum sermones, quanto sperantibus plura dicuntur. haud dubia destinatione discessere Mucianus Antiochiam, Vespasianus Caesaream: illa Suriae, hoc Iudaeae caput est.*

After Mucianus' speech all the others gathered around more boldly, gave encouragement, and brought up the responses of seers and the movements of constellations. Nor was Vespasian himself immune to such beliefs, being a man who, later master of the world, openly kept a certain Seleucus, an astrologer, as his guide and prophet. Omens from his early life began to return to his memory. A cypress of remarkable height on his estate had suddenly fallen down and, having on the following day risen again on the same spot, continued to flourish, just as tall and broader. As the soothsayers agreed, this was a significant and favorable sign, and the greatest distinction was promised to Vespasian, though he was only a young man. But it was the award of triumphal ornaments, and a

¹What follows is the text printed by Heubner (1978), and all references not further identified hereafter are to the *Histories*.

consulship, and the glory of victory in the Jewish War which seemed to him first to fulfill the promise of the omen. Once he had gained these, he began to believe that he was destined for the throne. Between Judaea and Syria lies Carmelus: this is the name of the mountain and of the god. There is no image to the god and no temple, since that is their tradition, only an altar and at this they worship. As Vespasian was sacrificing there, and mulling over his secret hopes, the priest Basilides, after inspecting the entrails repeatedly, said to him: "Whatever it is, Vespasian, that you have in mind, be it to raise a house, or to extend your estate, or to add to your slaves, to you is given a mighty house, enormous boundaries, and a mass of men." Gossip had seized upon this riddle immediately, but only now began to unravel its meaning. There was no topic the common soldiery talked about more. Within his entourage the conversation was almost constant, for the hopeful need more reassurance. Reaching a definite decision, they departed, Mucianus for Antioch, Vespasian for Caesarea: the former is the chief city of Syria, the latter that of Judaea.

Founder of a dynasty, Vespasian was a figure around whom stories like these were bound to cluster as thickly as they had once around Augustus, and eleven anecdotes have come down to us, falling naturally into two groups, five from his earlier years and six from the time of the Jewish War.² Not surprisingly, the sole author to record every one of them is Suetonius, and he arranges them in what he clearly took to be their chronological order.³ How many of the tales were familiar to Tacitus is arguable. We can prove only that he knew three, the two narrated in this chapter and an incident involving a statue of the Divus Iulius (1.86.1). If this were the sum total of his information, it would be absurd to launch into a discussion of the skill with which he selected his stories, while the literary artistry with which he presents them would turn out to conceal merely the inadequacy of the material. There is reason, however, to think him acquainted with most of the eleven anecdotes. Negatively, it can be maintained that he rejected one, a tale about the appearance of three eagles at First Bedriacum told by Suetonius alone, because he could not bend it to his purposes, and substituted the bird of unusual appearance seen at Regium Lepidum (2.50.2).⁴ Positively, and more significantly, Dio-Xiphilinus reports six omens apropos of Vespasian's accession, only one of which—the cypress tree—he shares with Tacitus; and since Dio found these

²The vague references to "other omens" made by Josephus *BJ* 3.404 and 4.623 can probably be included within this number, but I have left out of account the oracle of a great ruler to come out of the East, found in Tacitus (5.13.2), Suetonius (*Vesp.* 5.4), and Orosius (7.9.1–2), because it was not specific to Vespasian, although appropriated by him.

³Suet. *Vesp.* 5.2–7; see the convenient tabulation by Braithwaite 1927: 33. That the sequence was meant to be chronological seems clear from the biographer's practice elsewhere (cf. *Aug.* 94.1; Mouchová 1968: 34). This was disputed by Graf (1937: 36), who preferred a mixture of chronological and geographical criteria, a solution which failed even so to address Suetonius' misdating of the cypress omen (below, n. 10), or to explain why Suetonius should have put the visit to Mount Carmel before Josephus' prophecy when both occurred in Judaea (*Vesp.* 5.6; cf. Graf 1937: 39 and below, n. 36). On the more complicated scheme advocated by Gugel (1977: 66–68), one can maintain that Suetonius thought Josephus' prophecy the more important of the two items, but Gugel himself concedes the biographer's preference for a chronological layout (26, n. 13).

⁴Suet. *Vesp.* 5.7; Morgan 1993b: 321–324 and 329.

items almost certainly in the common source, that ought to mean that Tacitus was aware of another five episodes but rejected them each and every one.⁵ As for the left-overs, Dio records Vespasian's encounter with Caligula in his narrative of the latter's reign (59.12.3), and of that—improbable as it seems—Tacitus may not have been cognizant before he started work on the *Annals*. And Suetonius alone reports the story of an oak tree which predicted the fates of Vespasia's three children (*Vesp.* 5.2). Although this is very likely to have been the result of his own diligent, even "maniacal" research into the *omina*,⁶ it could be seen as a formidable rival to the portent of the cypress; for the sake of argument, therefore, it will probably be fairest to base our discussion on the proposition that Tacitus had knowledge of all eleven anecdotes.

Since it would have been remarkable if Tacitus had provided us with an exhaustive list of omens in the Suetonian manner,⁷ editors have not been troubled by his limiting his account deliberately to two. As an explanation for this, however, it is not enough to adduce the historian's earlier comment that "the empire's being destined for Vespasian and his sons by portents and oracles we believed only after his accession" (1.10.3: *ostentis ac responsis destinatum Vespasiano liberisque eius imperium post fortunam credidimus*) or, conversely, to declare that "a serious author had no right to omit a well-authenticated manifestation."⁸ Just as the latter judgement fails to allow for Tacitus' omitting the prediction made by Josephus, a prediction which reappears in Suetonius, Dio, and Orosius,⁹ so the sardonic tone of the former passage sits ill with his giving as much space as he does to the two omens he has chosen to narrate. It is only when we take into account literary considerations that we find an immediate, palpable reason for his procedure. Like most Tacitean writing, the entire chapter is constructed around a series of antitheses, and the two omens are presented in a manner to generate contrast after contrast.

So the portent of the cypress befalls a young man with his career still to make, and Tacitus' phrasing (*iuveni admodum Vespasiano*) sets the incident at a point when the Flavian was of pre-quaestorian age, certainly five to ten years younger

⁵ Dio-Xiphilinus 66.1.2–4 records three early omens (the ox, the dog, and the cypress), and three late omens (Nero's tooth, Nero's dream, and Josephus' prophecy). The order is not quite the same as Suetonius', but the differences are insignificant. On the common source see, e.g., Martin 1981: 189–196.

⁶ Thus Gascou (1984: 450), talking of the "soin maniaque" with which Suetonius assembled omens for his *Galba* (but see Gugel 1977: 27). Parallels for this particular story are presented by Graf (1937: 121, n. 184).

⁷ Whatever we make of Suetonius' fascination with omens (see especially Wallace-Hadrill 1983: 189–197), "Tacitus is not much concerned with the supernatural" (Syme 1958: 2.521).

⁸ The quotation is taken from Syme 1958: 522, commenting on the *avis inuisitata specie* at 2.50.2; cf. Plass 1988: 76.

⁹ Josephus *BJ* 3.400–408 (cf. 4.623); Suet. *Vesp.* 5.6; Dio-Xiphilinus 66.1.4; Oros. 7.9.3 (not strictly independent, since he quotes Suetonius).

than Suetonius believed him to be.¹⁰ Basilides, on the other hand, delivers his oracle to a mature man, an ex-consul and commander in an important war. Again, the omen of the cypress takes place on an estate which is not only in Italy but also in Vespasian's possession (*in agris eius*), a detail perhaps worth noting when Suetonius makes the land his grandmother's (*Vesp. 5.4: in agro avito*), whereas Basilides' prediction issues out of the East and promises him an estate of cosmic proportions (*magna sedes, ingentes termini, multum hominum*). Third, the earlier portent is interpreted by a group of local soothsayers (*consensu haruspicum*),¹¹ whereas the entrails are read by a single priest, who presides over a major shrine with usages that go far back into the past, as is indicated obliquely by *sic tradidere maiores*.¹² And finally, there is the contrast in the persons affected by these omens. As Tacitus organizes his material, the omen of the cypress is said to presage *summa claritudo* and appears to come true bit by bit, as Vespasian wins triumphal ornaments, the consulship, and the glory of victory over the Jews.¹³ When this point was reached, so says Tacitus, he began to believe that he was destined for the throne (*ut haec adeptus est, portendi sibi imperium credebat*). The importance of this omen, then, resides in its impact on Vespasian. The oracle of Basilides, on the other hand, is recorded, as we shall see, for its influence on his followers.

If this is enough to demonstrate why Tacitus reports only two portents, it will not explain his choosing these particular anecdotes. Now, so far as concerns Basilides and his oracle, it goes without saying that—antithesis or no—this must be made to appear the more significant of the two stories if Tacitus is to avoid bathos. The content of the prediction, enwrapped seemingly in mystery, certainly gives it more impact than the promise of *summa claritudo* derived from a cypress's vicissitudes; and the highly stylized nature of the language, to which Voss has drawn attention (1963: 17–18), rounds out the effect. The question here, however, is whether any of the other five omens set in this same period would have looked

¹⁰ After a careful review of Tacitus' usage Syme (1958: 671) concludes that *iuvenis admodum* refers to "the early pre-quaestorian years of a young man's life," i.e., around 18–20; cf. Wolff 1914: 263; Chilver 1979: 237–238; Le Bonniec and Hellegouarc'h 1989: 233, n. 7. This may seem over-precise, but other authors too so describe a person aged between eighteen and twenty-four (Livy 29.20.2; 39.47.1; Val. Max. 5.6.7; Vell. Pat. 2.2.3, 41.3, 93.1; cf. Curtius 7.2.12 and 9.19). By contrast, Suetonius *Vesp. 5.4* groups together the stories of the dog, the ox, and the cypress, and sets them after Vespasian's encounter with Caligula (sec. 3), an incident belonging in 38 according to Dio 59.12.3.

¹¹ The suggestion that the soothsayers were local goes back apparently to Meiser: see Valmaggia 1897: 148; Goelzer 1920: 292.

¹² As is remarked by Chilver (1979: 238), Tacitus evidently means us to see Basilides as the priest resident at Mount Carmel. This makes it improbable (though admittedly not impossible) that he is the homonymous priest of 4.82.2, as is maintained by Scott (1934: 138–140 and 1936: 11–13), Nicols (1978: 125–126), Rajak (1984: 189), and Le Bonniec and Hellegouarc'h (1989: 223, n. 11).

¹³ It is misleading to hold, as does Heubner (1978: 274), that by *summa claritudo* "ist natürlich der Principat zu verstehen." This may agree with Vespasian's ultimate interpretation of the omen, but it makes nonsense of the progression Tacitus tries to convey by setting up an antithesis between *primo* and *ut haec adeptus est*, and by saying that Vespasian's earlier achievements seemed each in turn to have fulfilled (*implet*) the promise of the omen.

more attractive to Tacitus. Three we can rule out immediately, a dream of Nero's, the turning of the statue of Divus Iulius, and the appearance of three eagles at First Bedriacum. Whatever else Tacitus may have thought of them, Suetonius tells us that they were reported to Vespasian from Rome (*Vesp.* 5.7: *ex urbe*). So they could not have had on anybody in the East the direct psychological impact that Tacitus demands of the omens he records.¹⁴ Of the remaining two, one involved Nero's teeth and was trivial. The other was Josephus' prophecy of the Flavian's elevation to the throne, adjudged by Chilver (1979: 237) "a surprising omission" from Tacitus' narrative. Yet, for all Josephus' claims to a priestly and royal ancestry (*Vita* 1), he was but a prisoner-of-war when he made his prediction and, as he himself concedes (*BJ* 3.403), there could be no avoiding suspicions of *adulatio*. More impressive by far was an oracle delivered by a genuine priest, already in residence at an ancient and respected shrine, and bearing besides the highly significant name Basilides.¹⁵ Just as important, his oracle could be made by Tacitus to yield two more antitheses, that between the personal and the imperial connotations of the prediction,¹⁶ and—another detail of which there will be more to say presently—that between gossip's seizing upon the priest's response immediately and its grasping the full import only later.

It might seem more difficult to make a case for the anecdote involving the cypress, given the divergent assessments of Chilver and Heubner. For the former thinks it "a curiously insignificant one to choose," and in so doing begs the question as egregiously as does the latter when, going to the other extreme, he assumes that it was well known.¹⁷ The story of Basilides would also look "curiously insignificant," if our only source for it were Suetonius' jejune account,¹⁸ while the appearance of the tale of the cypress in Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio establishes only that it was recorded by the common source.¹⁹ Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that Tacitus' need for an omen out of the West and from Vespasian's earlier years restricted his choices severely. Quite apart from anything else, there was the difficulty that, in a work of gravity (2.50.2), three of his other four options were undignified, not to say indecorous: Caligula's stuffing muck down Vespasian's toga when he was aedile, the dog which—more appreciative of

¹⁴ Thus Tacitus uses the turning of the statue of the Divus Iulius from west to east merely to accentuate the atmosphere of foreboding as Otho leaves Rome (1.86.1). It is applied specifically to Vespasian by Suet. *Vesp.* 5.7 and Plut. *Otho* 4.8–9.

¹⁵ It is no obstacle that at 4.82.2 Tacitus explains the name. There the context requires that the play be made overt, whereas the silence here adds to the "mystery" of the scene.

¹⁶ Cf. Valmaggi 1897: 149; Goelzer 1920: 293; Heubner 1978: 276.

¹⁷ Chilver 1979: 237; Heubner 1978: 252, presumably following Graf 1937: 38 and 41.

¹⁸ Suet. *Vesp.* 5.6: *apud Iudaeam Carmeli dei oraculum consulentem ita confirmavere sortes, ut quidquid cogitaret volveretque animo quamlibet magnum, id esse proventurum pollicerentur.* ("In Judaea, when he consulted the oracle of the god Carmel, the lots were so encouraging as to promise that whatever he was contemplating or planning, no matter how big, would come about.")

¹⁹ The source cannot be the Elder Pliny, as was maintained by Fabia 1893: 158 and 210 (cf. Graf 1937: 41–42; Le Bonniec and Hellegouarc'h 1989: 222, n. 4). See Chilver 1979: 237.

refuse—brought him a human hand, and the domestic ox (*bos arator*, not even a sacrificial bull) which ran in from the fields and collapsed at his feet.²⁰ There was, however, one more story, preserved only by Suetonius, and even though it represents almost certainly the fruits of the biographer's own research, we ought to set it against Tacitus' narrative, since it will be better here to err on the side of caution (*Vesp.* 5.2):

in suburbano Flaviorum quercus antiqua, quae erat Marti sacra, per tres Vespasiae partus singulos repente ramos a frutice dedit, haud dubia signa futuri cuiusque fati: primum exilem et cito arefactum, ideoque puella nata non perannavit, secundum praevalidum et prolixum et qui magnam felicitatem portenderet, tertium vero instar arboris. quare patrem Sabinum ferunt, haruspicio insuper confirmatum, renuntiasse matri, nepotem ei Caesarem genitum; nec illam quicquam aliud quam cacinasse, mirantem quod adhuc se mentis compote deliraret iam filius suus.

On the suburban estate of the Flavii there was an ancient oak, sacred to Mars. On each of the three occasions when Vespasia gave birth it suddenly put out a branch from its trunk, a clear indication of the fate determined for the child. The first was thin and soon withered, and so the girl that was born did not survive a year. The second was very sturdy, long, and of a type portending great success. The third, however, was like a tree. So, they say, the father Sabinus, encouraged besides by a visit to the *haruspices*, went back and told his mother that a grandson had been born to her who would become a Caesar. But she only cackled, amazed that while she still had her wits about her, her son was already losing his.

There are a number of features in this anecdote that Tacitus could have exploited as effectively as he does the details in the tale of the cypress. We have a portentous tree on an estate in Italy, an interpretation by local *haruspices*, and even an age for Vespasian which creates a much stronger contrast with the recipient of Basilides' oracle than does his being *iuvenis admodum*. Moreover, Tacitus could have avoided any reference to the grandmother and her derisive laughter merely by making the estate Vespasian's, just as he does in the story of the cypress. It would not even have been an obstacle that, as Tacitus puts it later (3.75.1), everyone agreed that the glory of the house, the *decus domus*, rested with Flavius Sabinus, the elder brother, until Vespasian took the throne: that too could have been manipulated to produce a progression in Vespasian's ambitions from *summa claritudo* to *principatus*. The one crucial difficulty is that Tacitus could not have excised all reference to Vespasian's siblings so as to focus exclusively on the future emperor. And this is above all a literary consideration: the antithetical arrangement of the material could have its full effect, only if extraneous details about other members of the family were sloughed off.

²⁰ Suet. *Vesp.* 5.3–4; Dio 59.12.3; Dio-Xiphilinus 66.1.2. From another angle, so it could be maintained, each of these omens promised too much for Tacitus' purposes, i.e., the throne (for the symbolism involved see Mooney 1930: 398). The omen of the oak tree to be discussed next, like that of the cypress, could have been made less impressive by careful phrasing.

Whether or not Tacitus knew the tale of the oak tree, this argument establishes merely that he opted for the cypress *faute de mieux*. But even if we leave aside what is known generally about the beneficent associations of this tree,²¹ there are three indications that Tacitus saw more in the story than we have uncovered so far. The first, admittedly, is speculative, and it would be foolish to put any weight on it. According to his account, however, Vespasian at first thought the omen's meaning to be that he would enjoy a successful senatorial career, and Tacitus sets the incident in his pre-quaestorian years (*iuvenis admodum*). If we are to anchor the anecdote in reality, it may very well have provided one reason for Vespasian's reversing his decision not to accept the *latus clavus* and for his embarking on that career. Suetonius, to be sure, attributes the change of heart exclusively to the ridicule Vespasia heaped on her son (*Vesp.* 2.2). But this less than satisfactory explanation the biographer adopted, apparently, because he set the incident of the cypress some five to ten years later in his subject's life.²² The employment of *iuvenis admodum* for more than just antithesis, if such it is, leads to the second indication, the fact that Suetonius recorded the withering of this same tree shortly before Domitian's assassination.²³ It seems improbable that Tacitus would have failed to report the tree's ultimate fate at the appropriate point in the *Histories*, and thus have denied himself the opportunity to set up yet another antithesis, between the young Vespasian and the not-so-young Domitian, between the first and the last member of the dynasty. Third, and vastly more important, there are the statements of the Elder Pliny that the rebirth of a tree which had been uprooted, while not nearly as uncommon as we might imagine, had been recognized as a portent of good fortune for the Roman people since the time of the Cimbric Wars.²⁴ It need hardly be added that what was good enough for the Roman people was good enough for Vespasian.

It emerges, then, that Tacitus selected the two omens best suited to his purposes,²⁵ and our next task must be to examine the framework in which they are set, since close scrutiny will show that the underlying aim is not quite as straightforward as it has been made out to be. In fact, scholars seem thoroughly to

²¹ See Olck 1901. McCulloch (1984: 163–165) makes much of the cypress, in an attempt to prove that Tacitus recorded the death and rebirth of the *ficus Ruminalis* at *Ann.* 13.58, in order to hint at the eventual end of Nero and the coming of the Flavians. This seems highly improbable. Had Tacitus wanted to achieve such an effect, he would surely have exploited the tale of the sacred laurel which, planted by Livia, withered shortly before Nero's suicide (Dio-Xiphilinus 63.29.3).

²² Suetonius' explanation is accepted by Weynand (1909: 2627), Braithwaite (1927: 23), Graf (1937: 11–12), and Homo (1949: 16–17). But see Nicols 1978: 19–20 and above, n. 10.

²³ Suet. *Dom.* 15.2; cf. Braithwaite 1927: 33; McCulloch 1984: 164. Suetonius' love of such symbolism is discussed by Gascou (1984: 778).

²⁴ Pliny *HN* 16.132–133. Pepys remarks on a similar phenomenon under February 25, 1662: see Latham and Matthews 1970: 35.

²⁵ Fabia (1893: 158) reached the same conclusion by a much shorter route: "Tacite ne raconte évidemment pas tout ce qu'il sait: les expressions générales 'responsa vatum et siderum motus' le prouvent." Cf. also Weber 1921: 47–48; Graf 1937: 41.

have misunderstood the historian's reasons for bringing up Basilides' prediction, and so to have misrepresented its timing, its purpose, and its supposed effect. What has gone unremarked is that Tacitus is running two themes simultaneously, one centering on Vespasian and the other on his entourage, and that alongside the antitheses to which attention has already been drawn, there are parallels to reinforce the point. For the emperor-to-be it is the omen of the cypress which is decisive, but for his followers that role is played by the oracle of Basilides.

To take up the omen of the cypress first, Tacitus declares that initially (*primo*) Vespasian thought the promise of *summa claritudo* fulfilled by the award of triumphal ornaments (made at a date between 44 and 47), by tenure of the consulship (held in the last two months of 51), and by the glory of victory in the Jewish War (a claim he could make in June 68). Then, says Tacitus, when Vespasian had achieved this much, he began to take the omen as a sign that he would become emperor (*ut haec adeptus est, portendi sibi imperium credebat*). The accomplishments Tacitus lists are spread over more than twenty years, and to that extent they muddy the waters. Even so, he is telling us that there were two distinct stages in Vespasian's ambitions, one in which they stopped short of the throne, and the other in which they did not. And he is telling us too that this second stage had been reached some time before the meeting at which the contemplation of the omens occurred.

This helps to account for Tacitus' declaring, in the sentences which begin the chapter, that Vespasian himself was not untouched by *superstitio*: *ut qui mox rerum dominus Seleucum quendam mathematicum rectorem et praescium palam habuerit*. Since Tacitus sardonically furnishes the avowed master of the world with an avowed master of his own, the comment is taken regularly as a criticism of those who believed in astrology and the like.²⁶ Such it may well be, but emphasizing the strength of the emperor's *superstitio* fulfills two more functions. Adducing Vespasian's behavior as *princeps* creates the largest interval, and so the strongest contrast, between the aged emperor who puts his trust in Seleucus and the *iuvenis* on whom the cypress worked its magic, and this surely adds to the impact of that omen, just as reversing the contrast by setting the *iuvenis* against the victorious general who consults Basilides lends greater weight to the priest's predictions. More important, opening the chapter with an explicit statement about the strength of Vespasian's belief enables Tacitus to recur to that point but once thereafter, in the concluding remarks on the man's reinterpretation of *summa claritudo*, and in the meantime to develop the other theme introduced in the first two sentences.

²⁶ Sage 1990: 946; cf. Scott 1968: 76–77. From this angle, so it could be argued, the observation answers the question posed by Chilver (1979: 237), viz., how did anyone know that Vespasian believed in the various prophecies: a man of a type (*ut qui*) willing openly to keep an astrologer on strength was capable—in Tacitus' opinion—of believing anything. However, there is probably another incentive for the comment in the statement of Dio-Xiphilinus 66.9.2 that Vespasian in 70 expelled astrologers from Rome.

That other theme is embodied in the *ceteri* present for Mucianus' speech. With Vespasian, says Tacitus, they share a belief in portents and the like, and after the speech the *ceteri* make bold to surround their leader,²⁷ urge him on, and bring up prophecies of seers and movements of constellations.²⁸ Here the second theme is dropped, while Vespasian lapses into thought about omens from the past, his action conveyed by an unusual and poetic turn of phrase (*recursabant animo vetera omina*).²⁹ Its return is heralded by two details. There is the repetition of *ominis* in the concluding sentence on the cypress (*implet fidei ominis videbatur*), presumably to suggest the end of Vespasian's thoughts on the topic.³⁰ And the story of Basilides starts with a sentence notable for asyndeton and anastrophe (*est Iudaeam inter Syriamque Carmelus*), a disjunction surely designed to mark the change in focus.³¹

So far as concerns the prediction itself, scholars tend to insist that Basilides made it only shortly before the meeting at which Vespasian brooded over the omens (i.e., in May or June 69), resting this insistence apparently on the assumption that the oracle could not otherwise have exerted a decisive influence on anybody.³² But this is not at all what Tacitus says. Gossip, he declares, had seized upon the oracle at once (*statim exceperat*), and began to unravel the deeper meaning of the words only then (*tunc aperiebat*), that is, at the time of the meeting.³³ Just as there was an interval between Vespasian's original understanding of the omen of the cypress and his ultimate interpretation of it, so there was a time-lag between his visit to Mount Carmel and a full appreciation of the oracle he was given. This is one reason why Tacitus works so hard to give the episode an air of mystery, talking of Vespasian's secret hopes (*spes occultas*), Basilides' scanning of the entrails repeatedly (*identidem*), the priest's uncertainty over his petitioner's intentions (*quidquid est . . . quod paras*), and the supposed ambiguity of his response (*has ambages*). The murkier the atmosphere, the easier

²⁷ Strictly, *audentius* means more boldly than before, picking up on the activity of the *alii legati amicique* at 76.1.

²⁸ As another example of the way in which Tacitus ties together his material, it is worth noting that the chiasmic *responsa vatium et siderum motus* itself creates a chiasmus with the mention of Seleucus and the tale of the cypress.

²⁹ *Recursabant* is both *hapax* and poetic in color (Gerber and Greef 1903: 1363; Heubner 1978: 273).

³⁰ Nowhere else does Tacitus use the plural *omina* to refer to a single omen (2.1.2; *Ann.* 1.35.3; 4.64.1; 5.4.2; 6.37.2; 15.8.1), but the reverse of the pattern here may be found at *Ann.* 15.7.1–8.1: Pactus enters Armenia *tristi omine* (7.1); three portents are recorded; and he continues on his way *spretis ominibus* (8.1).

³¹ Asyndeton is perhaps a feature of prodigy style (it certainly is of Livy's: Luterbacher 1904: 57–60), but as Valmaggi (1897: 148) remarked, anastrophe involving coordinated substantives is rare even in Tacitus prior to the *Annals*: cf. Draeger 1882: 92–94.

³² See, e.g., Weynand 1909: 2634; *PIR*² B 60; Scott 1934: 138 and 1936: 8; Graf 1937: 39 and 41; Heubner 1978: 253; Wellesley 1989: 121; Schalit 1975: 285, n. 198 and 294; Rajak 1984: 189.

³³ *Aperire* means to discover or unravel a meaning hitherto obscure: see *Ann.* 11.34.1; Gerber and Greef 1903: 87; Moore 1910: 231; Chilver 1979: 238.

the reader would find it to imagine that there was a time-lag before anybody else grasped the significance of the prediction.

Tacitus himself gives us two indications to help determine how long he thought that interval to be. The obvious meaning of *Iudaicae victoriae decus* is “the glory of victory in the Jewish War,” this being a reference to the encirclement of Jerusalem completed in June 68.³⁴ And the statement that Vespasian was entertaining *spes occultas* when he consulted Basilides likewise points to a date after Nero’s suicide in June 68: nothing in Tacitus’ narrative supports the notion that Vespasian and Mucianus began plotting while Nero yet lived.³⁵ Against this, however, we have to set Suetonius’ evidence: for the biographer, seemingly relating the portents in what he thought to be their chronological order, places the visit to Mount Carmel ahead of Josephus’ prophecy, and though there are scholars to doubt it, Josephus asserts that he made his announcement in July 67.³⁶

The advantage of so early a dating lies precisely in the fact that anything said to Vespasian then would have attracted little attention, some gossip but no larger conclusions, and the whole idea of the time-lag on which Tacitus insists would become that much more plausible. However, it requires us to write off Vespasian’s *spes occultas* as a detail manufactured by the historian to heighten the mystery of the scene, this when it is the one item in the anecdote which is for any reason suspect.³⁷ There is nothing untoward about the idea of gossip’s getting hold of Basilides’ prophecy immediately: the consultation took place out in the open (as

³⁴ Throughout *Histories* 2 Tacitus represents the Jewish War as already won (see especially 4.3 and 76.4). He rests this conclusion on the complete encirclement of Jerusalem, achieved in June 68 (cf. 5.10.1; Josephus *BJ* 4.490; Nicols 1978: 54–57).

³⁵ Since Josephus *BJ* 4.32 reports that Vespasian sent Titus to Mucianus during the siege of Gamala in October 67, Nicols (1978: 60–61) inclines to set the first moves in the period before Nero’s death, despite Tacitus’ explicit evidence to the contrary (below, n. 40). Titus’ mission is better seen as an attempt to settle jurisdictional disputes (cf. Nicols 1978: 113–115).

³⁶ For the date on which Josephus asserts that he made his prediction see Schalit 1975: 260, n. 104 and 281, n. 160. While it is possible that he backdated it from the summer of 69 (Schalit 1975: 297–300; cf. Rajak 1984: 186–187), there is no support for this in the other sources. According to Suet. *Vesp.* 5.6, Josephus asserted confidently that he would soon (*brevis*) be released from his chains by Vespasian, the latter being emperor at the time, but we can make nothing of this. First, *brevis* is a word naturally to be found in prophecies (Suet. *Otho* 4.1; *Dom.* 15.3; cf. *Nero* 46.3 and 57.1); we might as well quibble over the *datum* in the words Tacitus gives Basilides (cf. Heubner 1978: 276). So while the adverb may have misled Suetonius into dating the prophecy later than he ought to have done, its use alone is not enough to prove him unaware of Josephus’ writings (thus Gascou 1984: 282; Rajak 1984: 191). Second, *brevis* is in any case an elastic term in Suetonius, and can cover as much as two or three years (*Aug.* 65.1). Dio-Xiphilinus 66.1.4 has Josephus declare that he will be freed μετ’ ἐνιαυτόν, which cannot mean “within the year” (so Rajak 1984: 191, n. 12), but “in a year,” and Graf (1937: 121, n. 199) suggests that it was a proverbial expression. Orosius 7.9.3 has no independent value, since he quotes Suetonius, but he still sharpens up the prophecy by replacing *brevis* with *continuo*. And even in Josephus’ text, as Rajak (1984: 188 and 191) points out, the prophecy is used less to flatter Vespasian than to excuse its author’s conduct.

³⁷ Heubner (1978: 253) has problems with Vespasian’s *spes occultas*, but he wonders how they could still have been “secret” in May/June 69.

Tacitus has been careful to specify), and so long as the priest spoke in normal tones, his words could have been overheard just as readily as the actions of the two participants could have been observed by, say, members of Vespasian's escort.³⁸ It also requires us to force *Iudaicae victoriae decus* into meaning something like "the glory of a victory in the Jewish War," to see this as a reference to the achievements Vespasian celebrated at Caesarea Philippi in August 67, and to argue that Tacitus, in using the expression as he does, misunderstood or misrepresented his source.³⁹ In the circumstances it seems more reasonable to maintain that here, as in the story of the cypress, it is Suetonius who is in error: either he reversed the order of Josephus' prophecy and the visit to Mount Carmel, through inadvertence or by design, or else he assumed that Josephus' prediction was made rather later than was in fact the case.

Not that setting the visit to Mount Carmel in the summer of 68 undermines Tacitus' account. Rather, the reverse. For one thing, Vespasian's bid for the throne depended on his settling his differences with Mucianus, and Tacitus indicates that they came to terms, largely through the agency of Titus, only around the close of that same year.⁴⁰ Before that Vespasian could certainly cherish *spes occultas* prompted by the encirclement of Jerusalem in June. Similarly, any remarks made to him then by Basilides would have occasioned talk simply because Vespasian visited the shrine, but they would not have been likely to produce larger interpretations—so long as his ambitions remained concealed. Finally, and this is the most important point for our immediate purposes, the oracle would have had no great effect on Vespasian himself if, as Tacitus says, the Flavian was concerned about his prospects for seizing the throne: it could only confirm beliefs he had already formed on the basis of the omen of the cypress. Hence Tacitus' ignoring Vespasian's response to the priest's words. Instead, we have the two-stage reaction by *fama* and, once the real meaning of the prediction has penetrated the (in these circumstances not so thick) skulls of his following, a distinction between the attitude of the soldiery and that of the officers. The former can talk of nothing else (*nec quidquam magis in ore vulgi*), while the emperor's immediate entourage, the *ceteri* properly so called, belabor the topic even more: *crebriores apud ipsum sermones, quanto sperantibus plura dicuntur*.⁴¹ And on this

³⁸ Although I have translated *exceperat* as "seized upon," the verb is used regularly to convey the sense of "overhearing" (cf. 3.32.3 and 73.3). For an example of history reconstructed from appearances alone see 3.65.2.

³⁹ At the start of August 67 Vespasian arrived in Caesarea Philippi, and during the twenty days he spent there he gave thank offerings for his successes in his first campaign (Josephus *BJ* 3.444; cf. Nicols 1978: 51). We need not doubt that these were victory celebrations: cf. Homo 1949: 43.

⁴⁰ At 2.5.2 Tacitus states explicitly that the two men established friendly relations only after Nero's death. That they were considering revolt by the close of 68 emerges from Titus' mulling over the possibility at Corinth in the second half of January 69 (2.1.3), and that this was then a new development is proved by the comments at 2.6.1 and 7.2.

⁴¹ For the stylistics of the sentence see Courbaud 1918: 269. According to Newbold (1976: 91), this is the only passage where Tacitus uses *vulgus* to convey public opinion without meaning by that

there follows, abruptly and—to give it still more emphasis—alliteratively, the decision to go ahead with the rebellion: *haud dubia destinatione discessere*.⁴² In short, the decision rests just as much on the enthusiastic response of Vespasian's following to a fuller understanding of Basilides' oracle as it does on the Flavian's ultimate interpretation of the omen of the cypress.

How, then, does this material fit into Tacitus' larger scheme? In the two chapters in which Vespasian ponders the advantages and disadvantages of revolt (74–75), his ambition to become emperor is indicated clearly. But he is also an experienced general (*vir militaris*),⁴³ as such, he is well aware of the strength of Vitellius' legions and dubious about the staying power of his own men: they had done no more than take the oath of allegiance to Vitellius in silence (74.1), and they were untested in civil war (75: *civili bello inexpertas*). Hence his greatest concern is that their loyalty will waver and, as a result, that he himself will be assassinated by one or two of his own men, just as Camillus Scribonianus had been killed by one of his Roman rankers. How familiar Mucianus is supposed to have been with Vespasian's thinking it is difficult to say, though Tacitus declares that there had been many private conversations (76.1: *post multos secretosque sermones*). Even so, his speech does not—and cannot—address Vespasian's fears of being assassinated,⁴⁴ for all that it makes the converse point that inaction is perilous: Vespasian could still be ordered by Vitellius to commit suicide, just as Corbulo had been by Nero (76.3). For the rest, Mucianus promises to be foremost in facing the dangers posed by Vitellius and his armies (77.2), and he says a good deal about the relative battle-worthiness of the two sides (76.4). What he leaves out of his calculations, however, just like Vespasian, is both the troops' enthusiasm, the *impetus militum* which Tacitus has stressed previously (2.6.2–7.2; cf. 2.79), and their inclination to believe in omens (2.1.2), itself reinforced by Titus on his return from the temple of Paphian Venus (2.4.2). And the omission is patently deliberate. This is the ground covered by chapter 78: Vespasian still needs reassurance that he will not be assassinated, and that the spirit of his men will not be broken.

These two interrelated concerns are resolved by the two interrelated omens of our chapter. Induced by the chatter of his entourage to think of the portent borne out by his previous successes, Vespasian is reassured by his interpretation of the cypress that he will become emperor and, at the least, will not be assassinated before he gains the throne. And this is as it should be: a simple soldier and in many ways a Roman of the old school (cf. 2.5.1; *Ann.* 3.55.4), he puts his faith in an omen from Italy, perhaps even from his own *patria*. Such a portent, however,

the opinion of people in Rome. But *volgus* here, as often elsewhere in the *Histories* (cf. Newbold 1976: 85–86), refers to the soldiery: hence the deliberate antithesis between *in ore volgii* and *apud eum*.

⁴² For Tacitus' use of alliteration to achieve specific effects see my discussion in Morgan 1993a: 783–784.

⁴³ For the force of *vir militaris* see Campbell 1975: 11–12.

⁴⁴ See further Morgan 1994: 123–125.

could scarcely exert the same influence on his following, neither the soldiery nor the officers. Whether or not they were as orientalized as Tacitus appears to have believed,⁴⁵ and whatever the degree of their sophistication, they required a sign from an important shrine, a shrine that—in the circumstances—had to be somewhere in the East. This need was met by the oracle of Basilides, to which they responded, now that they grasped its deeper meaning, with a degree of enthusiasm far higher than Vespasian himself had been inclined to grant them. As for the distinctions Tacitus makes inside Vespasian's following, the officers' being still more excited than the men boded especially well, in that these were legions whose discipline remained intact (2.76.4 and 82.2). And if one asks what was the stimulus that put Basilides' oracle into their heads at this particular moment, it can only be that the meeting was held at Mount Carmel, a natural rendezvous on the frontier between Judaea and Syria,⁴⁶ this being—of course—the ultimate reason for Tacitus' rejecting Josephus' prediction.

To bring out the literary design behind chapter 78 is not to convict Tacitus of writing "docudrama." We cannot fault him for not providing us with a comprehensive account of the origins of the Flavian uprising: that lay outside the announced limits of the *Histories* (1.1.1 and 11.3). What he does say about the rebels' earlier moves is elliptical, to be sure, but it is also coherent and—for want of a better word—plausible. Similarly, it smacks of carping to question the essential accuracy of his account of what transpired at Mount Carmel in June 69. We are just as much the prisoners of modern conventions in doubting the historicity of Vespasian's musings, Mucianus' speech, and the effect of the omens Tacitus records, as Tacitus was a captive of ancient conventions when he focussed on these same elements. It might be naive to suppose Vespasian himself the source for the material which touches on him alone, even though Josephus declares that he offered "many reasons" (πολλά) for hesitating to rebel.⁴⁷ But conventions or no conventions, there seems to be a solid basis of fact behind each detail, even the allegation that Vespasian was fearful of assassins.⁴⁸ However, Vespasian's fears could not be allayed nor the spirit of his troops demonstrated convincingly by the emollient verbiage of Mucianus. Hence the need for the material in chapter 78, something more striking and something more irrational. Since the meeting itself took place at Mount Carmel, it might seem as if Tacitus had absolutely no choice in the matter of Basilides' oracle, but this is not so. Had the previous visit occasioned no comment, he would presumably have found a means to exploit Josephus' prediction. As it was, he could not only make use of the oracle to

⁴⁵ For the evidence see Forni 1953: 54–55 and 1974: 383.

⁴⁶ Tacitus' concluding remarks on Antioch and Caesarea as *capita* point up the fact that the two leaders meant to take immediate, serious action; but in conjunction with *discessere*, they tell (or remind) the reader that the meeting had taken place *Judaeam inter Syriamque*, i.e., at Mount Carmel.

⁴⁷ Josephus *BJ* 4.604; cf. Suet. *Vesp.* 6.1 and 4; Dio 65.8.3a.

⁴⁸ According to Suet. *Galb.* 23 Vespasian believed that Galba had sent assassins after him from Spain.

illustrate the spirit of Vespasian's troops, but also set against it the tale of the cypress to bring out their leader's attitude. And all this was done in the most artistic manner possible in order for it to have the greatest impact on his Roman audience.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹I wish to thank the anonymous referees of *Phoenix* for their many contributions toward the improvement of this paper.

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