# Horror and Ambiguity in *La Historia del Noble Vespasiano*

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**Abstract:** This essay studies the 15th Century Spanish narrative *Vespasiano* as an ambiguous horror story that appealed to the public precisely because of the shocking nature of the events narrated. These describe in graphic detail the killing of Jews by the Romans during the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In addition to providing an account of the cruel punishments received by all those who participated in the death of Jesus Christ, this work can be read as a lament for the destruction of a city which 15th Century readers would very much like to have recovered from the Muslims, who ruled it at that time. The story of the destruction of Jerusalem became the standard by which contemporary horrors were measured. That is why *Vespasiano* was very popular in the Americas. In a stroke of genius, commercial publishers of the printing press's early years took a medieval narrative about the Jews, with connotations regarding the Muslims, and marketed it as a modern horror story, a mirror in which the public of the Age of Discovery could see itself. And the public did indeed recognize the image.

**Keywords:** Horror – Ambiguity – Vespasiano – Fall of Jerusalem – Anti-Semitism

One of the most popular narratives of the European Middle Ages deals with the destruction of Jerusalem and the slaughter of the Jews by the Romans in A.D. 70. There are multiple adaptations of this episode, the roots of which are found in the early centuries of the Christian era (Lida de Malkiel 15-34). One of the most famous versions is Flavius Josephus's book, *The Jewish War,* originally written in Aramaic, which circulated in Greek, Latin and other European languages for centuries.[1] In the Iberian Peninsula, there is a Catalan translation, issued by the German publisher Nicolás de Spindeler in 1482, and a Castilian translation dedicated to Queen Isabella by the Jewish convert Alfonso de Palencia, printed in 1492, the year she expelled the Jews from Castile.[2]

[1] See Whiston's edition, *The Works of Josephus*.

[2] Regarding the expulsion of the Jews, see Amelang, *Historias paralelas*, and the bibliography listed there.

A perceived connection between this traumatic event and the fall of Jerusalem could help explain the popularity in the Iberian Peninsula of the various stories about the A.D. 70 catastrophe, beginning with that of Flavius Josephus.

Josephus, born in Jerusalem in 37 A.C., was a Jew of noble birth who grew up in an environment of cooperation between the local aristocracy and the Romans. In his youth, he went to Rome, where he was impressed by the power of the empire and developed a taste of court life, managing to meet Nero's wife Poppaea. When he went back to his homeland, he found himself involved in the Jewish revolt as commander-in-chief of Galilee. He survived the siege of Jotapata, while most of his people did not, a controversial development. After surrendering to the Romans in 67 A.C., he met Vespasiano, whom he flattered by predicting his imperial future. When this prophecy materialized, Vespasiano freed him and provided him with financial support as well as with his family name--Flavius. Vespasiano's successors, Titus and Domitian, were also kind to Josephus, who devoted the rest of his life to writing. His works include a history of the Jews titled *Jewish Antiquities*, a brief *Autobiography* and a defense of the Jews titled *Against Apiano*, in addition to *The Jewish War*.[3]

Josephus, who did a fair amount of travelling with his powerful protectors, accompanied Titus to Jerusalem in 70 A.C., witnessing the famous siege of this city from the Roman camp. The political situation of the Jews was complex, with much internal dissent, which made Josephus uncomfortable. In addition, he was indebted to the Roman imperial family, which made his attitude even more complicated. He thought that Roman preeminence was inevitable and wrote his history of *The Jewish War* for a Roman audience. It is not surprising, thus, that his narrative of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, and all the works based on it, show some ambiguity. He was chronicling the demise of his own people and, as he says in the prologue to his work, he allowed himself to express his feelings about the miseries they experienced. He also expressed feelings of pride in his narrative of heroic episodes, such as that of the suicide of the Jews in the fortress of Masada. Josephus, who first fought against the Romans and then sided with them, made a point of praising both sides. He certainly took great pains not to place the blame for the disaster of the destruction of Jerusalem squarely on either side or on himself. The medieval versions of the story of the destruction of Jerusalem show more ambiguity than Josephus's history. For example, Josephus says that some deserters swallowed gold coins before leaving Jerusalem and, when the Romans learned of it, they disemboweled all of them in order to get the treasure. In some of the medieval versions of this story, however, the Jews are forced to eat the treasure by the Romans, who drive them to their tragic end.

[3] For an introduction to the life and works of Josephus, see Hadas-Lebel, *Flavius Josephus*; Raphael, *A Jew Among Romans*.

The most influential medieval version of the story is probably the 12th Century French poem, *La Venjance Nostre Seigneur*,[4] which seems to be the source of multiple prose variations in different European languages. In the Iberian Peninsula, examples exist in Portuguese, Catalan and Castilian, including a 15th Century Castilian narrative titled *Historia del noble Vespasiano*, which survives in two editions, printed, respectively, in Toledo by Juan Vázquez between 1491 and 1494, and in Sevilla, by Pedro Brun in 1499.[5] In addition, there is a lost 16th Century print, which was transcribed by Adolfo Bonilla y San Martín, who, unfortunately, did not supply any information about the original text (Bonilla y San Martín 379-401). There is also a 17th Century manuscript version in the Bodleian Library in Oxford (Hook "La transmisión" 130). The work, thus, seems to have been quite popular in Castile.

Indeed, *Vespasiano* was one of the best-sellers of the early years of the Spanish printing press, along with such popular works as *Oliveros de Castilla*, *El conde Partinuples*, *Roberto el Diablo*, *Flores y Blancaflor*, *Pierres y Magalona* and *Paris y Viana*, which constitute a "publisher's genre" (Infantes 115), that is, a literary genre created by commercial publishers to meet public demand. The public wanted short, inexpensive books which were full of excitement, leading publishers to edit medieval manuscripts with those characteristics. Unlike the narratives mentioned above, however, *Vespasiano* lacks love and adventure and includes rather disgusting scenes involving the violent ends of those involved in the death of Jesus Christ. For this reason, some critics have been uncomfortable with this work, which does not seem to fit the mold of medieval and early modern popular narratives or comport with today's sensibilities, due to its anti-Semitic theme. Referring to the 14th Century English version of the story of the destruction of Jerusalem, Ralph Hanna comments that it has not received very much critical attention, because it is so offensive (Hanna 109). Yet, it seems clear that this narrative was extremely popular for a very long time. Anthony C. Spearing has suggested that the satisfaction the public derived from the work related precisely to its unpleasant elements (Spearing 167). I believe this to be the case and consider *Vespasiano* an early example of a horror story, a narrative genre that became more clearly delineated centuries later.

Indeed, this work's plot consists of a string of terrible events, beginning with the Roman Emperor Vespasiano's leprosy, which is eating away his face until Veronica cures him with the sudarium containing the imprint of Jesus's face. In light of his miraculous recovery, Vespasiano promises to become a Christian but not until he avenges the death of Jesus Christ.

[4] See Gryting's edition, *The Oldest Version.*

[5] Modern editions of these texts have been published by Foulché-Delbosc, "Ystoria;" González, *La ystoria del noble Uespesiano*; Hook, *The Destruction of Jerusalem*.

The war begins when, encouraged by King Archileus, son of King Herodes, Pilatos rebels against the emperor, who undertakes a siege of Jerusalem. This results in a tremendous famine, and two Christian mothers whose children had died decide to cook them and eat them. Desperate about his future, Archileus commits suicide by falling on his sword. Before surrendering the city, Pilatos decides to hide its treasure from the Romans. He does this by having all of the city's gold, silver and precious stones ground into powder and forcing each Jew to eat a certain amount of the powder. When the Romans discover that the Jews have eaten the treasure, they start killing them and cutting them open to recover it. Vespasiano spares the lives of some Jews and puts them in boats to wander the world and be blamed everywhere for the death of Jesus Christ. In one boat, all of the Jewish men begin to menstruate.

After being baptized with his son, Titus, and all of his subjects, Vespasiano sentences Pilatos to be chained in a well, with minimal rations of food, expecting him to die soon. When the emperor sees that time has passed and Pilatos is still alive, he has Pilatos taken from the well and placed in a tower on an island in a river, where prisoners are starved to death. The tower, however, collapses and sinks into the river, and Pilatos is taken by demons directly to hell, a spectacular ending for a very dramatic horror story.

Robert B. Salomon says that horror stories are structured around two separate worlds that mirror each other (9). Horror results from crossing the threshold between these worlds and involves loss and catastrophe. Salomon uses a statement of a female Holocaust survivor, quoted by Lawrence Langer, to illustrate this point: "You have [she tells the interviewer] one vision of life, and I have two. I--you know--I lived on two planets" (qtd. in Langer 53). *Vespasiano* presents many inversions that have the effect of turning the world upside down and moving the readers to a different reality. As David Hook has noted, in this work, all those who participated in the death of Jesus Christ receive punishments representing the inverse of their actions ("The Destruction" 132). For example, the Jews, who betrayed Jesus Christ for thirty pennies, are sold thirty to a penny. Along the same lines, I believe that Pilatos's death in the water represents the inverse of his washing his hands of responsibility for Jesus's death. Pilatos seems to be deeply associated with water in the historical imagination, since he also is said to have conducted some expensive waterworks in Jerusalem, which made its inhabitants very unhappy. His tragic end, thus, mirrors the actions for which he is best known. The same thing can be said about the Jews, whose menstruation can be read as a punishment for making Jesus Christ bleed. This powerful image also invokes the myth of the Jewish body, which was perceived as different throughout the centuries (Gilman 3-4). Among other things, male Jews were seen as feminine. Indeed, due to the practice of circumcision, their genitals were associated with blood. The image of Jewish men menstruating, thus, reflects both the myth of the Jewish body and an inversion of the Jews' actions in connection with the death of Jesus.

In addition to punishments, there are many other types of reversals or inversions in this work. For example, as Bonnie Millar (205) has observed a propos of the 14th Century English version of the story of the destruction of Jerusalem, the Christian mother's eating the body of her dead son can be read as an inversion of the Eucharist, where others eat the body of the Virgin's son, Jesus Christ. This is interesting, because Jews were often accused of eating Christian children, which Alan Dundes believes was a reversal of the Eucharist: the Jews were accused of doing in real life what the Christians did symbolically (Dundes 336-66). In this work, however, the Christians are the ones who eat Christian children, thus assuming the role traditionally reserved for the Jews, which is another kind of reversal. While the Christians eat their own children, the Jews eat their own treasure, ground into a powder of gold, silver and precious stones, in a communion of sorts. In the standard anti-Semitic mythology, Jews are presented as loving money too much. According to that mythology, Jews eating their treasure would have been contrary to their nature, just as Christian mothers eating their own children would have been opposed to theirs. This consumption of treasure is a kind of repugnant communion that both exploits anti-Semitic myths and undermines them. In effect, the Jews were given no choice. First, they were forced to eat the treasure, and then they were killed for it, just as in real life they were put in a position of having to lend money for a living and then persecuted for it.

Many of the work's episodes are connected to food, which seems to be the signature theme of the events of A.D. 70. Besides the spectacular incidents of the Christians eating their children and the Jews consuming their treasure mentioned above, Vespasiano's leprosy is eating away his face, uncovering his jaws and teeth, which must have made eating difficult, another inversion. When the emperor recovers and gets baptized with his son and his people, he celebrates the occasion with a banquet, signifying that the situation has been reversed. After Vespasiano has taken the water and food associated with his baptism, he sentences Pilatos to die of starvation in a well, which is an inversion of his own circumstance. Thus, the legendary hunger associated with the fall of Jerusalem permeates all the episodes in this work, which focuses sharply on bodily horrors.

Accordingly, the work emphasizes bodily dismemberment. The Christian child is cut into pieces to be eaten, and when Pilatos's men arrive at the house attracted by the smell of the meat, one fourth of his body has already been roasted. Seeing that they are looking for food, the mother takes the body of her son by the foot and offers to cut another fourth for them, causing them a great shock:

> Clarisa tomo su fijo por el pie, & dixo: "Emprestad me vn cuchillo con que corte, & enbiar le he vn quarto desta carne; & el faga la guisar como el quisiere & a su voluntad." E quando los escuderos vieron que de su fijo queria cortar vn quarto, & que ya fallescia otro quarto, el qual ellas tenian [a] asar, ellos lo

> ouieron a fuerte cosa, & de manzilla que ouieron, boluieron el rostro, & salieron se dela casa. (Foulché-Delbosc 610-11)

Similarly, the Jews are bought and cut open in order to remove the treasure from their bodies. So many of them are killed and dismembered that the Romans cannot walk, except by stepping on their broken bodies, and the stench forces them to bury the dead, after which they demolish the city:

> Y complida fue la ocasion del pueblo en aquellos que fueron vendidos treynta judios por vn dinero. & fueron los vendidos por cuenta quarenta mill personas, amenos de quantos yazian muertos & descuartizados por la cibdad, como no podian andar sino sobre muertos. Mas quando todo esto fue fecho, el Emperador mando que todos los muertos fuesen puestos en fondo de tierra, por que demientra que estouiesen enla cibdad no ouiesen fedor. & luego fue fecho, ca las gentes lo auian a voluntad, & cada vno fazia quanto podia. E luego el Emperador mando derribar la cibdad & los adarues, asi que la piedra de abaxo ni la de arriba no quedo en obra, antes no quedo piedra sobre piedra. (Foulché-Delbosc 619)

This dramatic end can be seen as a reversal of what happened to the body of Vespasiano, so eroded from leprosy that his jaw and teeth were in full view. The miraculous cure of Vespasiano, which restored wholeness to his body, resulted in the dismemberment of many bodies in Jerusalem.

Finally, the work emphasizes the destruction of a civilization by focusing on the collapse of significant buildings. The destruction is such that no stone was left standing, except for Solomon's temple and David's Tower. This process is echoed in the episode of Pilatos's death, which involves the collapse of a tower that sinks into the river. Since the destruction of Jerusalem was not complete, the work completes that destruction metaphorically by including this extremely graphic tale. As noted by Hook ("The Destruction" 140), this is Stith Thompson's motif number F 941.3 (tower sinks into earth), a well known folk theme (Thompson 240). The collapse of a tower has obvious connotations of humiliation and destruction of a civilization and, thus, is a reversal metaphor par excellence.

Horror works best when it can be visualized, which is why it only came of age fully as a narrative genre with the advent of movies. In the medieval and early modern era, horror was present in many epic works, which contain scenes of great violence, as well as in visions of hell, most famously in Dante's *Inferno*. Horror also was a crucial component of hagiography (lives of martyrs) and theater (revenge tragedies). *Vespasiano* shares some characteristics with all of these literary genres and is eminently graphic. Indeed, the Sevilla edition contains fifteen woodcuts, a considerable number of which portray ghastly scenes.

For example, woodcut two (Foulché-Delbosc 584) depicts Vespasiano, with a visible hole in his right cheek, about to be cured by Veronica's sudarium, on which Christ's face is imprinted; woodcut nine (Foulché-Delbosc 610) shows the two mothers eating their children and inviting Pilatos's men to join them; woodcut ten (Foulché-Delbosc 614) illustrates King Archileus committing suicide by falling on his sword in front of both armies, with the point piercing his heart; woodcut eleven (Foulché-Delbosc 618) shows Romans sticking their hands into the body of a Jew, whose belly has been cut open, to get to the gold, silver and precious stones inside; woodcut twelve (Foulché-Delbosc 620) represents Jerusalem being demolished by the Romans; and woodcut fifteen (Foulché-Delbosc 632) portrays the collapse of the tower, sinking into the river with Pilatos inside and three devils in attendance.

The visual history of the fall of Jerusalem was very popular in late medieval and early Renaissance art. Hook notes that a tapestry presently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York depicts several of these gruesome episodes and that surviving tapestries also can be found in various other museums and private collections (Hook *The Destruction* 2-5). He points out that references to tapestries illustrating this narrative are found in documents in France, England and the Iberian Peninsula and that there is textual evidence that Queen Eleanor of France and King Henry VIII of England owned tapestries of this kind. In some cases, the textual evidence includes information about the events depicted. For example, there is a reference to a tapestry belonging to Fernando of Aragón, Duke of Calabria, which is described as a rich cloth showing the history of the destruction of Jerusalem and a woman roasting her son and eating one of his arms.

In addition to being the subject of many static visual representations, such as tapestries and other types of illustrations, the story of the fall of Jerusalem provided the theme for many plays, or dynamic visual representations, including works by such writers as Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla and Álvaro Cubillo de Aragón (Cortijo 76). The earliest Castilian play on this story is the 16th Century *Auto de la destrución de Jerusalén* (Rouanet 502-24), which is based on a narrative contained in the early 16th Century Castilian miscellany of Catalan origin known as *Gamaliel* (Hook "The *Auto*" 336-7). There also was a Nahuatl version of the *Auto,* written probably also in the 16th Century in Mexico (Del Paso y Troncoso). According to María Rosa Lida de Malkiel both versions—Castilian and Nahuatl—were very popular for many years, as were other stories about the fall of Jerusalem, which were well-known in Mexico and the rest of Latin America (Lida de Malkiel 31, 158-9).

It seems that the main episodes of the story of the fall of Jerusalem were used very successfully as decoration and entertainment on both sides of the Atlantic for centuries. It is not surprising that commercial publishers in the first years of the printing press sought to make money with *Vespasiano*, a truculent medieval narrative, illustrated with a plethora of shocking woodcuts, which they had reason to believe would appeal to the public of the modern era. They were right.

The story of destruction of Jerusalem, with its atrocities and its ambiguity, became the standard by which contemporary horrors were measured. That is why *Vespasiano* was very popular in the Americas, since, as Lida de Malkiel points out, the Spaniards, from the very beginning of the conquest, saw a connection between Jerusalem and the New World. For example, in their accounts of the conquest of Mexico, Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo compare it to the fall of Jerusalem, establishing a parallel between the Indians and the Jews. Conversely, in their narratives about the siege of Buenos Aires by the Indians, an event during which the Spaniards, who were starving, had to resort to cannibalism, Isabel de Guevara and Ruy Díaz de Guzmán see a parallel between the Spaniards and the Jews (Lida de Malkiel 158-9).

According to Elisa Narin van Court, who studied the 14th Century English version of the story of the destruction of Jerusalem, this work presents unresolved ambiguity, because it shows brutality and benevolence simultaneously (Narin Van Court 232). She believes that this expresses a dualistic Christian ideology about the Jews, originating with St. Paul, who indicated that the Jews were enemies of God as regards the gospel but beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For her, this work shows a profound confusion about Jews, Christians and violence. Along the same lines, Roger Nicholson describes this narrative as "border-work" (462) due to its ambiguity.

This ambiguity certainly is present in the Spanish *Vespasiano*, where the Jews are portrayed as victims of events they cannot control. The struggle is really between Pilatos and Vespasiano, two Romans, one Pagan and one Christian, and the Jews are caught in the middle of this fight. The work emphasizes that if they had not eaten the treasure, many would have survived, but Pilatos forced them to eat it, thus precipitating their demise at the hand of Vespasiano's soldiers.

In addition to the basic ambiguity of the work with respect to the Jews, there is a connection between the story of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Crusades, which makes this narrative even more ambiguous. As Mary Hamel has suggested with reference to the 14th Century English version of the story of the destruction of Jerusalem, there are many parallels between that narrative and the literature of the Crusades, and the connection between the two must have been clear in the minds of the medieval readers: both are about the conquest of the Holy City for religious reasons and involve horrible events (Hamel 177). Christine Chism also stresses this connection, pointing out that every crusade from the first to the fourth was associated with pogroms (Chism 21).

Jerusalem and the Crusades certainly were on Spaniards' minds for a very long time. For generations, Spanish kings dreamed of conquering Jerusalem after finishing the Reconquest of Spain, which did not happen as soon as they expected. After the conquest of Granada in 1492, however, Jerusalem must have seemed within reach.

The Spaniards, who had been waging war against the Muslims for centuries, had the momentum to start a crusade. Indeed, the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, and Cristopher Columbus, dreamed of getting enough gold in the Indies to start a new campaign to liberate the Holy Land (Todorov 11, Noonan 49-83). It is, thus, not surprising to find *Vespasiano* listed among the books owned by Cristopher Columbus's son, Fernando (Hook "La transmisión" 169), or to learn that Hernán Cortés's half-Indian son, Martín, died in North Africa fighting the Moors (Alves 79).

In preparation for the recovery of the Holy Land, there were several attempts to conquer territories in North Africa. Not coincidentally, these adventures were linked to the story of the fall of Jerusalem, as we can see in a 16th Century Castilian poem by Martín de Herrera about the 1509 conquest of Orán, carried out by Cardinal Cisneros according to the wishes of the by then-deceased Catholic Queen. This poem, which speaks at great length about the fall of Jerusalem, is based on multiple sources, including *Vespasiano*, although it seems to draw more heavily on another version of the fall of Jerusalem, contained in the 13th Century *Legenda Aurea* or *Legenda Sanctorum* by Jacobus de Voragine, available in a Castilian print titled *La leyenda de los santos*, published in Burgos between 1497 and 1499 by Juan de Burgos (Cátedra et al. 2: 273).

In this political context, *Vespasiano* could have been read in two ways. The first was as an account of the cruel punishments received by all those who participated in the death of Jesus Christ, with some subtle sympathy for their suffering. The other, more subtle, interpretation was as a lament for the destruction of a city which the readers would very much like to have recovered, not from the Jews, who had lost it long before, but from its current rulers, the Muslims. The readers, thus, would find themselves feeling pity for the fate of the city and its inhabitants, even though they were supposed to be glad that the latter were punished for their part in the death of Jesus Christ. This empathy actually served to increase the feeling of horror that the story produced and to augment its applicability to contemporary events.

European nations engaged in unification and colonization--most prominently Spain, which was simultaneously engaged in campaigns against Jews and Muslims and the conquest of America--needed an outlet to express their feelings about these enterprises and their consequences, and this narrative was perfect. No other horror story caught the imagination of the early modern era like the cannibalism, suicide, killing, dismemberment, mass destruction and clash between cultures of the events of A.D. 70. In a stroke of genius, the commercial publishers of the early years of the printing press took an ambiguous medieval narrative about the Jews, with connotations regarding the Muslims, and marketed it as a modern horror story, a mirror in which the public of the Age of Discovery could see itself. And the public did indeed recognize the image.

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