PROJECT MUSE®

"Remember Amalek!": Vengeance, Zealotry, and Group
Destruction in the Bible According to Philo, Pseudo-Philo,
and Josephus (review)

Susan Niditch

Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies, Volume 24,
Number 3, Spring 2006, pp. 179-181 (Review)

Published by Purdue University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.2006.0071>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/197155>

“Remember Amalek!” Vengeance, Zealotry, and Group Destruction in the Bible According to Philo, Pseudo-Philo, and Josephus, by Louis H. Feldman. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004. 272 pp. \$34.95.

Professor Louis Feldman opens his excellent work with critical questions in the ethics of war: How could a merciful God desire to exterminate all Amalekites as commanded in 1 Sam 15:3? How did some of the early thinkers in Jewish intellectual history make sense of such a command: the hellenistic philosopher Philo who died c. 50 CE; so-called Pseudo-Philo, the first or early second century author of the *Biblical Antiquities*; and Josephus, the pre-eminent Jewish historian of the first century? Feldman's study of treatments of the Amalekite enemy expands into a wider examination of the ways in which these classical Jewish authors dealt with a variety of biblical cases in which God commands the total annihilation of groups of people, without attention to their status as non-combatants, their age, or their gender. Included in this set of texts are the stories of Noah's flood and Sodom and Gomorrah, the plague of the Egyptian first-born, the vengeance of Phineas, and the whole phenomenon of *herem*. Often translated “the ban,” this term, rooted in the verb meaning “devote to destruction,” refers to the wholesale destruction of men, women, and children in an ancient Near Eastern war ideology that emerges, in particular, in biblical conquest traditions preserved in Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua. Feldman is interested in the extent to which Philo, Pseudo-Philo, and Josephus “raise issues of divine morality.” He asks also how war was perceived to be justified.

Feldman's work includes a beautifully careful and systematic review of each ancient author's response to relevant biblical scenes or sets of texts; a useful summation concludes each section. Feldman nicely contextualizes the ways in which the three understand biblical events pertaining to war in terms of their own historical-cultural settings, experience, and worldview. He examines what their views of biblical tales of mass killing might tell us about them and their first-century intellectual orientations. He concludes, for example, that Philo's understanding of warring relations with Amalek teach “the superiority of the ethereal to the material,” “one of Philo's favorite themes.” The incident involving Amalek allows Philo to present the heroism of an aged Moses, a “great leader.” As one might expect, Philo allegorizes, equating Amalek “with passion or evil” (pp. 21–22). Pseudo-Philo treats Amalek as an “embodiment of wickedness (p. 23).” He has no qualms about “the divine command of genocide.” The evil must be rooted out. Josephus has the greatest number of references to Amalek, and provides a military man's lengthier version of the

enemy's attack than the terse biblical account. He has considerable interest in Saul's and David's encounters with Amalekites.

Feldman also provides a useful collection of relevant Rabbinic midrashim concerning Amalek. Their "creative historiography" concerning Amalek, to use a phrase of Yitzhak Heinemann, indicates that the Rabbis are troubled by the demand that all Amalekites be destroyed, suggesting that even Amalekites might convert to avoid being placed under "the ban." Such Rabbinic views concerning Amalek tally with other midrashic treatments of passages such as Deuteronomy 20 directly related to the ban (see, for example, Sifre on Deuteronomy 202 and Deuteronomy Rabbah 5:14).

Feldman shows with good attention to nuances and complexities how attitudes to the use of violence are by no means uniform in the tradition. The same is true, of course, of the biblical tradition itself. Moreover, Feldman seeks to explain the ambivalences of the ancient writers towards the inherited tradition. Josephus, for example, is loath to seem to approve of the priest Phineas' God-sanctioned vengeance. In Feldman's view, Josephus does not want to seem to approve of the zealots who opposed the Romans in his own time and who would have considered Phineas a hero (p. 215). Feldman's compact conclusions draw useful comparisons between his sources, again placing each writer in his historical and or intellectual context: Pseudo-Philo has no ethical difficulties in regarding God's commands to destroy literally and displays a seeming lack of discomfort with banning traditions. Philo allegorizes in order to "answer Jews in his own community who raise questions of theodicy." He is concerned to show that "the innocent should not suffer for the sins of the guilty" (p. 224). Moreover, he does not wish to anger non-Jews by suggesting that the Israelites hated the Gentiles, and so as Feldman deftly shows, walks a fine line in explaining these ethically troubling passages. Josephus shares Philo's interest in portraying Jews as good citizens and seeks to justify the killing in war one way or another.

One of the most interesting implications of Feldman's careful study is that ancient Jewish writers worried about the ethical implications of biblical texts pertaining to war. As Michael Waltzer has said, "the truth is that one of the things most of us want, even in war, is to act or to seem to act morally" (*Just and Unjust Wars*, 1977:20). Feldman's erudition and thoroughness is evident in this study. He selects texts well and allows the voices and concerns of the ancient writers to emerge.

There is, of course, a large cross-disciplinary and important bibliography concerning the ethics of war in general and genocide in particular. Feldman does not engage with earlier works such as Bainton's classic study and the collection of articles by Bramson and Goethals or with more recent articles

and monographs by scholars such as Mark Jurgensmeyer, David Little, S. R. Appleby, and Roger D. Peterson. The reader longs for a deeper analytical and interpretive framework that sheds further light on these important ancient interpretations of biblical war texts. Fields of religious ethics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology have much to contribute. Professor Feldman resists taking risks. For example, he might have explored whether Pseudo-Philo's attitudes to warring behavior, so carefully described, provide hints to the background and provenance of this difficult-to-date-and-identify author. On the other hand, Professor Feldman has provided all the necessary primary material with consummate erudition and thoroughness, thereby inviting others to further analysis and exploration.

Susan Niditch
Department of Religion
Amherst College

Josephus on Jesus: The *Testimonium Flavianum* Controversy from Late Antiquity to Modern Times, by Alice Whealey. *Studies in Biblical Literature* 36. New York: Peter Lang, 2003. 231 pages. \$65.95.

The passage in Josephus' extensive bequest to posterity most discussed today is one not everybody is sure he wrote. The *Testimonium Flavianum*, Josephus' comment on Jesus Christ, was apparently not of great interest in the first two centuries. This may be because it wasn't available. But interest in this questionable passage since the Protestant Reformation has more than made up for the early lack of it. Alice Whealey's last comment in this book is, "... after four hundred years the question of the *Testimonium Flavianum*'s authenticity has still not been settled" (p. 195).

It appears that Whealey shares the view of Louis Feldman, whose influence is strong in her study, that some form of the received text is authentic, though not that Josephus wrote, "He was the Christ." (I will refer to the passage in question as TF.)

Josephus wrote under the patronage of the Flavian dynasty of Roman emperors, and apparently all that he wrote was stored in the imperial library in Rome. Christians handed on Josephus' works through the centuries after this library perished, probably at the time the barbarians sacked the city in the early fifth century CE.

A question Whealey doesn't address that is pertinent to the matter of the early Christian use of Josephus is how Christians would have had access to the imperial library before Emperor Constantine lifted the ban on Christian-